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NORTH WIND

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TALL CHIMNEYS

PLAYS

RED NIGHT
THESE FATHERS!

PLAYS IN ONE ACT

HARVEST
THE BACK WAY
THE PROOF
GEORGE PROPOSES

NORTH WIND

BY

JAMES LANSDALE
HODSON

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FOR THE MEN I LIKE

CHAPTER I

His luck held good. He achieved the swiftest march of his life down to Echelon B, spurred on by fear that a shell would get him. Curious how much "windier" you were, he reflected, coming away from danger than going into it. Perhaps it wasn't so curious, though. Going into it, you screwed yourself up and, anyway, it had to be faced. Departing, you simply couldn't shift fast enough. And now that he was going home for a commission nothing would really have contented him but a sixty-miles-an-hour armoured car.

He had caught up with Harrop, a small, stocky man inclined to plumpness. Harrop brought to this grey, muddy road along which horses went at a brisk walk, and where artillery limbers and drivers were merely a darker hue than the road and sky in this monochrome of greyish-brown desolation, a sense of reality. Harrop made credible this strange, unreal land that alternately depressed and exalted you, that produced at times an odd sensation in you of having departed this life or having become another individual altogether. Harrop was English hedgerows, and glittering cutlery, and Manchester grey cloth, and matriculation examinations, and the years that were to come after the war. For to put Harrop with his fresh, chubby cheeks—yes, chubby and fresh even in the midst of this—his bluish-grey eyes, his thick little legs, his cap pulled and worn rakishly, dandyishly on one side, to put

him on this road was to show that man could not ultimately be subdued or much changed: that while the war was driving some men mad and maiming others, robbing some of honour or honesty or sense of values, it was, miraculously, leaving the Harrops untouched; or so it seemed at first glance. True, Harrop could make a fire in a wet trench or purloin another man's pull-through, or sing an unexpurgated version of "Mademoiselle from Armentieres", or tell why she wore black garters, without a blush, or obtain by divers machinations two or three extra tots of rum on a cold, dark morning; or pronounce a raw onion with bully beef something of a delicacy: but he was, in the main, the same Harrop who had left his Yorkshire school to go for a soldier; and to his Yorkshire school those fresh cheeks and untroubled eyes, though wiser and more knowledgeable, would return, with luck.

Frobisher's worn, slender face looked down on Harrop. He was unfeignedly thankful to see him. "You going Echelon B for commission?" he asked. Harrop looked up and grinned assent. "You're going at a hell of a lick," said Frobisher, ". . . nearly as fast as me."

"Never walked so fast in my bloody life," said Harrop. "Just as I got out of the communication trench, Jerry dropped a pip-squeak about twenty yards off. You should have seen me doing a bunk. I felt at the moment that I was the only bloke in the war—that it was being fought for my special benefit. Compree?"

They plodded on. "You're not thinking of having a rest soon?" asked Frobisher presently. "This nigger don't rest," said Harrop, "till he sees those blasted wagon lines." Frobisher smiled appreciatively: this was a man after his own heart; who had "wind up" and was perfectly cheerful about it, who could sing with unaffected sin-

cerity: "O my, I don't want to die, I want to go 'ome."

"How do you feel about coming back as an officer?" asked Harrop.

Frobisher said: "I'm concentrating on the leave. I'd have sold my damned immortal soul for this leave and three months at cadet school. Carried my papers about for months, wondering whether it was worth while to go to St. Omer for a month, and then over the top and the best of luck with, say, the first Argyll and Sutherlands. But immediately all below sergeant had to be trained at home, it became my duty to become an officer: to lead the men, my lad; to put my education and trench experience to a nobler and higher purpose."

"It'll be something", said Harrop feelingly, "not to have to carry a god-damn rifle. If I don't get rid of it soon, I can see myself having to take one to bed with me when the war's over." "We might", he added, thoughtfully, after a short silence, "be able to wangle not coming back again; or a transfer to the Air Force or the Machine Gun Corps."

"Inland Water Transport for me," said Frobisher: "bringing up rations on the La Bassée canal; or the Army Ordnance, going to Spain to buy those Spanish revolvers which are a menace only to the fellows who wear 'em. I was terrified I'd have to fire mine one day—they had holsters without tops that got choked with muck."

"About as good as our Lewis gun," said Harrop, "which wouldn't fire if you breathed on it."

Echelon B was on the rearward slope of an undulating desert of mud. It was December 1916, and the trenches were but a few miles away; but many of the Transport men were living in tents. "Boer war ideas still persisting," said Frobisher, as he and Harrop defied Army Regulations

and rolled themselves together in the four blankets they had scrounged from the quartermaster.

"What time did you say", asked Harrop, "the train leaves railhead to-morrow?"

"Ten o'clock."

"We're sure to be bombed to-night. I shan't sleep a wink." But five minutes later he slept, while Frobisher, lying with his back tight against Harrop's, listened to his regular breathing.

Half a mile down the sunken road a howitzer crashed spasmodically, and the faint hum of an aeroplane could be heard overhead; but it didn't disturb his thoughts. He was warm and drowsy and feeling content. It had been a mixed eighteen months in France, with several slices of luck—a leave, four days with the Fifth Army rest camp near Boulogne: that came after the Somme, when his platoon had six men left—and spells in various cushy parts of the line. He had been finding this winter worse than the last—all the fellows said the same—resistance lower, blood thinner maybe, outlook more hopeless, more pals dead. They were all "fed up to the back teeth" (that was the phrase), sick of the old men running the war, disgusted with the newspapers which never told all the truth, with the cartoons that made war a joke, and with the people at home who thought nothing of a battalion being smashed to bits, but got excited if a score of munitions workers were blown to hell. He had felt these things more than most maybe: he had wept after the Somme, he had more than once been insubordinate when idiocy and red tape held stronger sway than usual and his nerves were like frayed violin strings, and once he had become so far spent that he had roundly declared that if he were sent back to Le Transloy he would desert. The battalion

hadn't gone back so the testing moment had not arisen; but—rather to his disgust, so potent are the restoring powers of rum and sleep—the day after his threat he was so renewed as to be joking and full of badinage. As a child recovers from tears so had he often recovered from exhaustion. The recoveries were slower, and fell shorter each time of the maximum; but they were still being made. Lying there and thinking of the platoon up in the line who were sitting on icy fire-steps, sleeping with feet trailing in the mud, wolfing cold beans and deeming themselves lucky to get 'em, starved and lousy and bored when things were quiet, worn out and pitiably insecure when liveliness was abroad, he wriggled his back against Harrop's and thought what a lucky devil he was.

The tent flap was thrust aside and a rough entrance made by a transport man back from rations. He lit a stump of candle and a cigarette, and as he unlaced his boots, said: "They were shelling railhead a bit ago. Hope there's enough left of it to take youse fellas off tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Frobisher.

"Don't mention it—you got a couple o' my blankets. You're a lucky pair o' sods goin' home," he pursued, after a moment. "And yet . . . I dunno. One o' the clerks in B.H.Q. went west yesterday—only an arm left of him. He'd a brother in our mob and we didn't want to upset him, see; so we stitched up an old piece o' wood in an overcoat and blanket, and gave it a pukka funeral—padre, surplice an' all. Brother was quite happy about it—in a way, you know. The dead bloke—he'd never been in no danger, you might say. So you never know your luck. You might go 'ome and come back and get done in, and me still goin' strong."

"Exactly," said Frobisher.

"Drop o' rum wouldn't turn your stomach, mate, would it? 'Ere!" A metal flask was tossed across to Frobisher who dexterously freed his hands from the blanket (he was lying wrapped like a mummy), unscrewed the top and drank. He didn't, as he would once have done, rub the top with his hand to remove the previous lips' saliva.

"Bon santé!" he said. "Sorry about your blankets."

"That's orl right, mate. I'll have two dinners tomorrow. . . . I'll say you're still here, see? Good night, mate. If you can stay at 'ome till the first seven years is over. . . ."

"I've got you," said Frobisher. "I'll do my best."

Railhead was quiet when they clambered into the truck faintly emblazoned "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8", a device which always produced a wry smile on Frobisher's lips. Harrop sat down on the floor and began to open his pack. He took out a cold chicken, a small brown loaf, a fruit cake, and a metal-corked flask of *vin ordinaire*. "A Christmas parcel a little before its time," he explained briefly. Frobisher leaned in the doorway and stared about him. Again he felt sweeping over him the sensation that the scene was unreal, or that he wasn't awake. Was the reason some slight lightness in the head—relief, maybe, at the notion that his ordeal was over—or his intense curiosity and interest in the scene? Railhead looked as though pioneers had arrived in a forlorn and devastated land and begun to carve roads out of chaos: roads of earth utterly void of green or vegetation, with banks of mud. Piles of dark planks, of dirty yellow boxes of ammunition, of bluish-grey shells rusting, of coils of steel and

brown wire barbed and unbarbed, of picks and shovels, new and aged, and of new virgin duckboards, the wood raw and splintery, were dotted haphazard. A Nissen hut or two had been erected, in and out of which the R.T.O. and his clerk stepped, and to which despatch riders on incredibly dirty motor bicycles came at a furious pace, pitching and rolling. Old shell holes, grey with age and holding water, had been joined by new ones, blacker and incisive in design—the previous night's creations. Overhead there suddenly broke the muffled, quiet boom of anti-aircraft shells, and he saw the sky blossoming as if pods of raw cotton were bursting. "I've got the wind up like hell," observed Harrop, pausing for a moment in his onslaught on a wing of chicken. "Have a leg before a 'coal-box' wrecks the old home."

Frobisher sat down and joined him in the meal. They passed the flask of wine to and fro and got warmer and more talkative. "War would be a hell of a job without wine, wouldn't it?" observed Harrop. "And rum," said Frobisher. "Too bloody true," said Harrop. "I nearly shot Baslow one morning when he'd had too much rum and went over the top to pinch a German. Saw him running back—misty morning it was—and by God, I thought they were coming over. Scared me stiff. But the queerest thing was at Le Transloy. You remember how the Divisional General stopped our rum in the line——"

"The old codger who once saw a trench painted on a blasted map?"

"Yes, the one we christened 'God go with you; I'm too busy.' Well, one morning our own artillery knocked hell out of us, you remember—nobody knew where the blazes we were—and in about ten minutes, Sergeant Winstanley was in charge of half our company. You know what a

pernickety bloke he was—all spit and polish and obey orders no matter how damn stupid and potty they are—well, after we'd spat out the muck and things had quieted a bit we began to sniff rum. Talk about pointers sniffing the breeze! And then we saw Winstanley paddling through the muck, singing as he cuddled the jar: 'I was a good little girl—till I met you' and asking himself: 'What about you, Sern't Winstanley? Don't mind if I do,' and pouring himself out a stiff dose. Just before he got to us we saw an artillery captain splashing down after him, very het up indeed. 'Here, you!' he was shouting to Winstanley. Presently Winstanley turned and saw him, stared him up and down and poured himself out another drink. I put a round through my barrel to make a road through it and to ease the situation—sort of create a diversion. The artillery officer was bawling: 'Where's your officer?' and Winstanley was saying, with his mouth twisted in an awful grin: 'Officers? What do you think we are, siege gunners? There *are* no officers. I'm in charge here. . . . Your shells promoted me . . . half an hour since.'

" 'You're drunk!' said the officer.

" 'Not quite,' said Winstanley, taking another step our way and, half pausing, to wave a hand affably and say: 'Love to all at home.' Just then we heard the quick, hoarse whine of the shell, and we ducked; but it got Winstanley. We ran to him. He was frightfully smashed in the stomach, but for a moment or two perfectly conscious. He whispered to me: 'I've wanted to tell those —— off good and proper for long enough.' He died like a kid that's happy—too badly hurt, I suppose, to feel anything."

"It was a good finish," said Frobisher, helping himself to a piece of cake. "He was a tortured bloke—too much

sense to believe in half the orders he had to put over. He once told me if Nelson had been in our mob he wouldn't half have got it in the neck for his blind-eye business."

"They get you both ways," said Harrop without bitterness. "What's the odds? A subaltern's life is a fortnight, isn't it? In and out, quick—that's my idea; and more get wounded than killed, so the sooner you're over the top when you return, the better. At least"—he sighed—"that's how it strikes me now. When I *do* come back. . . ."

"I rarely find", said Frobisher, "that my philosophy is proof against the exigencies of the moment. I don't believe in God . . . at least I'm quite indifferent about Him . . . I hardly know where I am on the matter . . . but when the bottom fell out of things at Delville Wood, I found myself praying. Pretty ghastly, that. The awful inactivity, partly, I suppose. You crouched, hearing the masses of metal hurtling towards you, and you sort of said: 'You can't damn well hit me unless God says you may.' That was about all there was to hold on to." He got up and stamped about the floor of the truck. Suddenly the train started, flinging him against the side. "By God," he said, "we're off!" They were both quiet. The grinding of wheels, the creak of wood; a hoarse cry or two in French, the screech of wheels on points as the trucks swung on to another line. A small explosion sounded behind. He hurried to the door and was in time to see a tiny shower of dark earth thrown up by a shell falling fifty yards from railhead. "I hope", he said grimly, "the signals aren't against us." But his eyes had begun to shine with excitement and colour was creeping into his pale cheeks. Harrop had risen, too, and was listening. "You can't hear a thing for the blasted rusty wheels," he shouted irritably. The truck was gathering speed and bumping

and rolling a little. "Jerry's wakened up the engine-driver!" yelled Frobisher. Exultation was running in his blood; he felt slightly hysterical. Harrop lurched across to give him a cigarette. He was grinning broadly. "I've not been so scared", he cried, "since I went to the latrines just before leaving the front line . . . damn place, as usual, was a couple of feet higher than the trench . . . most dangerous place anywhere about . . . you know . . . fine target." But Harrop wasn't actually scared; he knew, as Frobisher knew, the danger was well-nigh over.

At Amiens where they changed trains they had their first bath for two months. The train ran to Boulogne in sunshine.

Gear and rifle on the rack, Frobisher sat on the edge of a seat in a crowded compartment, and felt as if he were going on holiday. He and Harrop caught one another's eyes and smiled at each other, at a farm woman in scarlet petticoat whose basket overhung the lap of a fiercely-bearded gentleman in black, and at two poilus of the 1916 class who found life a great joke. Frobisher hoped his platoon, when he got back to trenches, would have some youngsters in it; all damned rot about veterans being the best soldiers; your nerve got worse; the lads who came up raw, curious, ignorant—they were the right stuff. He remembered his own first shells, how disdainful he had been, refused to take cover; now if he heard one coming, he would be under the seat in a jiffy. Would he, though? In future, he'd have to show an example.

It would be great fun, taking some raw lads into the line; being a father to 'em; for he supposed that was how he would feel. "Like as a father pitieth his children," the psalmist said. Yes, he would pity them; the gradual

quenching of their spirit, the swift quelling of their laughter when a man dear to them was hit, the form outraged of him who had been their friend and was now nothing. They would chatter in the front line till he scolded them and told them of enemy listening devices or of patrols lying outside the wire; they would be wanting to use braziers and loose off rifles, they would throw the earth too high when revetting. They would pronounce the life a great lark . . . the thrill of first sentry-go, the hilarity following the first rum issue, the eeriness of moonlight, and the gaunt faces of men with shadows on them as they passed to and fro round traverses, the breaking of dawn over torn, defiled no-man's-land, the drift of mist; and, later, the warmth of sun and, maybe, larks singing. He would see them responding to all that, as he had responded. Afterwards would develop the monotony, the dread, fear, despair and loathing; the slow attrition of patriotism and courage, the sap of strength and wear and fray of nerve. How would he himself bear it all a second time? He could imagine himself going forth almost gaily, renewed, zestful, sharing in some part the new men's eagerness and enjoyment of novelty; but the freshness would go swiftly—six months, say—exposing him, nervous, irritable, too often afraid and tortured with the fear of letting his men see it.

He was staring at the floor, and when he looked up, Harrop was leaning over offering him a cigarette. He lit it and thought: "What an idiot I am, thinking this; I shall never last six months; and, anyway, I'll have a dug-out, and the responsibility will hold me together; and food'll be better . . . and whisky, I suppose. . . ." But again he saw himself: a thin, lanky fellow, ("a couple of yards of pump water", and "as far through as a tram

ticket", were the Saddlebridge phrases) leading the Argyll and Sutherlands on a raid armed with knobkerries and trench daggers, and primed with the latest tricks of drawing your revolver sights across the fellow's face if your ammunition were spent, and knowledge of the exact spot to put your knee or your foot so that he wouldn't beget any more Fritzes, and how to use your fingers so that he wouldn't see his children when he got home. Frobisher felt sick and cold at the thought. Ought he to take this commission? Suppose he was a washout, suppose he couldn't stick it? His commission would put a searchlight on him, it would stand him on a small eminence; his every action and word would be counted, weighed, and his silence and demeanour examined by forty men; to be cashiered, or sent as a dud to the base, or . . . by God, or shot in the back by his own men during an attack. Oh, it had been done, just as men gave themselves "Blighty ones" sometimes, when they were at the uttermost end of their strength and their minds panicked, and their senses ran amok. Did their minds panic when they shot their officer? He thought not; they were probably quite calm about it in a grimly, angry sort of way. Bates, the New Zealand fellow, who had come to their battalion by mistake, told him how he came across some Machine Gun Corps fellows cursing among themselves because one of their crew had failed to shoot their lieutenant as he came back from a reconnoitring patrol. "We may never get the same chance again," they had been saying. "For weeks we've been waiting, and now you fire and miss him." The lieutenant, Bates said, oblivious of his escape, had strafed the crew for firing when the patrol was out . . . damned careless . . . he'd stop their rum if they did it again. . . . Might have been shot! Frobisher's

mouth twisted in a grin as the humour struck him. Maybe he himself would some morning emerge round a traverse as a fellow accidentally fired a round while cleaning his rifle; yet, no: they would exercise a little more ingenuity than that.

His mood changed and he reflected that this was a nice sort of thing to be thinking, when he was going home. Damn it all, he'd stuck eighteen months of it, and arrived at an estimation of himself—no adventurer, no seeker for glory, but no dodger, panicker, or funk beyond the normal either; perhaps not quite so low as normal; for, while he had been terribly afraid two or three times, the strangest experience was the discovery that he wasn't always afraid and that he could sit in a small hole—a sheltering useless except against the tiniest splinters—and, while death in monstrous form and with devilish noise filled the air within feet of him, preserve a measure of composure. Yes, he reckoned he would be as good as most of 'em with Sam Brownes strapped around their middles, and better than some; he must be content with that.

They stayed overnight at the Y.M.C.A. hut, Boulogne, lying on deck chairs which they stretched flat on the floor near a stove, counting that luxury. Other men on leave occupied the room, too; and Frobisher, accommodating his shoulder and hip-bone to the floor, rubbed his chin gently in the rough wool of his cap comforter, wriggled his warm toes in his boots and feeling exceedingly happy inside him, listened to the scraps of talk, disjointed, rich, that men let fall as they grew matey and got down to "kip".

"I tell thee, she were a spanker. Kissin' 'er were like t' fust swig o' rum on a cowd mornin'—goes reight through thee. . . ."

"Captain sez to Nobby: 'Eether you're a bloody liar or else I am.' An' Nobby sez, quite calm: 'Well, *I'm* not a bloody liar, sir.' Captain 'ad to laugh, an' Nobby gets off."

"Carried a bloke dahn larst week . . . wot d'you think was the larst thing 'e sez? 'E sez: 'Don't drop me in a shell-'ole 'cos I'm that full of 'oles, if yer do, I'm sure to drahn.' By the time me an' Walter 'ad finished larfin' the bloke was dead. . . ."

"What I like about them French girls at La Bassée is that they don't pretend they don't know what a chap wants. . . ."

"Then a Big Bertha drops on us an' when we digs Tom out, he sez, spittin' out a lump o' muck: 'Gie me a taste o' Piccadilly any ole time' . . ."

CHAPTER II

THEY TRAVELLED from Euston as far as Bridfield together. Both had their roots deep in the north. Harrop changed there for Wakeford, and Frobisher went on to Saddlebridge. Harrop, he discovered, had worked half-time in a mill, had known what it was to stumble in the half-dark of a winter morning along a canal bank, barking his toes on the cobbles, and been glad to take off his clothes in the factory near the engine boilers and lie on the warm flags to warm his thin legs before work began. When he was a "little piecer" he, Harrop, used to hang up his *English Grammar* at the end of the spinning mule, and catch glimpses of it as he went to and fro. The Potteries were the beginning of home to them both. Frobisher stared out at the ghastly slag heaps, the discoloured canals, the twisting cindery paths, the rows of cottages built almost atop the works, and the tumbledown wooden cotes for hens. There was character here, he thought; here where folk lived in a ruck, and worked in a ruck; unable to get away from each other; where everybody knew everybody else and pretence was useless; where the parents of the "love-child" were known, and hatreds and loves and spites, and scandals and humours and comedy and tragedy were as tightly woven as threads in cloth. They passed a tall, rusty iron chimney from which a pennant of flame was flying, blood-red in the late afternoon's gathering dusk. It stirred him,

quickened him. They ran past forges, those ramshackle buildings which, even when trade was good and molten metal ran white hot and greedy and livid, looked as if they were falling into decay; they looked down over arches into deep narrow streets like gorges where dark stone flags gleamed faintly in the light of street lamps, and a piece of tram-line would glint with the black, steely look of a bayonet. Men were moving, this cold night, without overcoats; their jackets shiny with oil and grease and their trousers rusty with metal shavings; and women, tired out with long monotonous hours besides lathes which went on spinning shell after shell or nose-cap after nose-cap or ring after ring, were walking homewards drooping a little. He saw it and was stirred to the fibre of him; he looked on it hungrily. He had trod such cobbled streets as a child, seen drunken men lurch in and out of those brass-barred doors, stood near the forges and been scorched with the glowing, burning heat; seen the sparks fly on to black earth and on to men's leathern, burnt aprons in a devilish fairy dance, slipped his arm round girls' waists in passing down those narrow gloomy ginnels that cut from street to street; gone for picnics drawn by horses in scrubbed-out coal- or cotton-barges, walked for miles with his Irish terrier along canal banks, and eased his pace while Gyp leapt in and swam along for quarter of a mile at a stretch, yelping and tossing his head and refusing to come out. He had lain in bed and heard the drumming of iron-shod clogs on stone flags as hordes of operatives streamed to work, he had dodged the shooting and thrusting rods and whizzing wheels in the weaving sheds, and slipped on the spinning room floors turned to mahogany by the oil of year after year—those floors where, hour after hour, spinning mules marched to and fro, tire-

less, relentless and demanding to be fed with new bobbins, to have breakages caused by steel mended by human fingers. He had stood on the hillside and counted below him forty or fifty chimneys rearing their heads into the blue and found them, if not beautiful, at least not repellent; found them mighty and splendid in their symbolism of rampant energy; he had even seen nothing foolish in looking down upon a ridged, angular, weaving-shed roof of bluish glass and finding it resemble, for a moment, a lake of water. The north was in his blood; and when he thought of the north he thought of it, curiously enough, as a southerner thinks of it—pitheads, and furnaces, and mills, and standardized streets, clanking trams, filthy trains, and ringing feet; heavily fed and clad middle-class men and women in clothes of ill-cut, magnificent material, the men's suits with a multitude of pockets for watches, metal calculators, pattern and order books, and their wives as fond of brooches, and bangles and gold chains and jet as their mothers before them. Except that Frobisher thought of all this not with slight condescension but proudly. These teeming millions of hard-bitten, humorous, shrewd, warm-hearted, stubborn, rather religious folk were seen by him as the salt of the earth, striking off in their conflict with one another a tragi-comedy that he could not imagine being equalled elsewhere.

"My brother Dick", Harrop was saying, "was a devil for joking. He worked on the railway—goods office. Last April Fools' Day he made out a consignment-note to Midgley's, the textile machinists, for 'One giraffe (male) in crate'. He said nothing about it—just left the consignment-note with the others and, of course, it went to the carters. They saw nothing strange about it—the consignment note was official enough . . . and they hunted

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all over the goods yard for the blessed giraffe. They emptied a whole van they'd loaded for fear they'd put it in without noticing it. They rang up and down the line to other stations. ' 'Ave yo' seen a giraffe in a damn crate?' they asked. ' 'Ave we 'ell as like,' was the answer. They rang up Midgley's, too. Midgley's said they weren't expecting a giraffe, but they were sending some mules away—meaning spinning mules. Well, it wasn't till late afternoon that the goods yard tumbled to it they'd been done and that there wasn't a giraffe's long neck poking out of a wagon and being shunted up and down somewhere; and by that time the tale was all over the town. People started ringing up: 'What about them two lions for Learoyd?' they said; or 'When can we expect that basket o' snakes for Hebden Bridge?' Dick nearly got the sack—they've a sense of humour in Wakeford."

"You're not so funny as we are in Lancashire," said Frobisher. They began to argue about it, Frobisher claiming that the Tykes lacked sparkle and lightness and wit, that they were grey and drab in mind, like their stone walls, and heavy as wool in texture.

"Well, we're not gormless, any road," said Harrop. "We haven't given birth to a series of tacklers' tales that are founded on the assumption that we're all half-wits like your Manchester man bound for Ramsbottom who stood on top o' the tram in pouring rain and when told to come down, said, astonished: 'Why? Is that part of the tram goin' to Ramsbottom too?' "

"When you've got any God's amount of brains," said Frobisher, "you can pretend to be doolally; we manufacture those tales against ourselves so that you won't be too overawed; just as Scotsmen, knowing themselves to be too generous by half, invent and export all the stories

of meanness so that people won't take too much advantage of their kind hearts. If you're a Duke you can afford to wear an old suit, if a Colonel your tunic doesn't matter; but, by God, if you're a second loot, you must be posh. Don't forget that, my lad."

"My brother Dick", resumed Harrop doggedly, "did another funny thing, too. On Sheffield station he was talking to the engine-driver, and just as it drew out he started shouting 'Fire! Fire!' like mad. All the chaps in the train poked their heads out, and as they went by he knocked their hats off. You never saw such a sight—the platform littered with trilbys, and bowlers and caps and a hundred heads, red-faced, eyes bulging, mouths shouting and telling him what a nice lad he was. It cost him five quid. They stopped the train and came back for their hats. But he always said it was worth it."

"Seems to run in the family," said Frobisher, bantering-ingly.

Harrop grinned. "Yes," he said, "my father was funny and he knew it. My mother was funny, too—but she didn't know *she* was funny." He paused and stared out of the window. "You know," he said, "you've got to be a bit humorous if you live like we used to live; if you weren't, you'd go potty. Humour's the natural escape; there's plenty o' Pagliacci's in Yorkshire. My mother nearly had a fit when she heard I was in for a commission; she was pushing me forward with one hand and holding me back with the other; but she's got a big mind really—she allowed me to leave the mill where I got twenty-four shillings a week to take an office job at fifteen bob with better chances of study; you've no idea what that nine shillings a week meant to her. She'd the makings of a Florence Nightingale in her. By God, when I get my uniform I'll

walk her all round Wakeford and take her in the stalls at the Theatre Royal, and make her drink tea all afternoon in Robinson's café. There's a bloke—a sergeant at the depot: dodged the column—my mother used to wash for their family; was supposed to get her breakfast when she arrived, but she didn't always get it; they patronize her or try to. Let 'em look out."

Neither spoke again for a long time. Frobisher was thinking how gorgeous it must be to have a mother and father; a mother you could tease and love and walk about the town on your arm and tell your troubles to and borrow money from and bring high honour; she must be handsome and cultured and stern and kindly and play golf and dance and skate; be able to laugh at a risqué play and read poetry aloud so that you wanted her never to stop. And a father—well, he could spare a father better, though it would have been jolly to go to his old school and learn what a devil he was and meet his friends and rag him about his old-fashioned politics and get him to talk about how he met mother (though he probably wouldn't) and the way to tell good brandy and how to choose a cigar. They would have been in business together; but no, he could never see himself in business. Uncle Ben had tried hard enough there, and it hadn't been a success. Besides, his father had made money too easily and lost it too fast—cotton "futures" were as unreliable as racehorses and women, they said in Saddlebridge—and his fragile, dark-eyed wife from Cornwall had pined among the mills and poured her soul into painting and writing verses; and, after presenting her husband with a son he didn't want, had never survived her ordeal. As for Frobisher's father, he had loved his wife too little while she lived and too well when she was

gone; and no one ever knew for certain how much accident and how much design threw him from his horse's back to the cobbles of Saddlebridge market place and broke his neck. Twelve months later that was. So that Martin Frobisher never knew aught of his parents except what others told him, but he gathered that far back his father had connections with the Thomas Horton who invented the spinning frame and that it was from one of Horton's soldier sons who did little but drink and spend and adopt fancy ways and fancier friends and help to pauperize the old musician-inventor that Philip Frobisher got his manners and habits. Brains uncontrolled and airs that a purse couldn't run to—that was his father. His mother had neither the strength of mind or body to fight as was needed, and was overborne; overborne by life. At that moment Frobisher caught a glimpse of the terror and hardship and despair and enemy that life can prove, saw it as a crag that you constantly try to surmount and time after time fall back from with bleeding hands and scarred face. Maybe your shoes were thin and slippery and your ankle twisted—while some other fellow in his nailed sturdy boots went up the crag-face as if it were a staircase.

Frobisher had been brought up, as they said in Saddlebridge, by Susan and Benjamin Frobisher—that was the order—Susan and Ben. Aunt Susan used to say, with a twinkle in her hazel eye: "I shouldn't love our Ben half so much if he weren't a gobbin." But Ben wasn't really much of a gobbin. He managed West's spinning and weaving mills "to some tune". When Dawson's were making calls on shares that turned some folks grey and made others laugh (because when your troubles are so bad that they can't go any worse, you may just as well start laughing, Saddlebridge folk say), West's still paid their 20 per cent.

But Ben could certainly forget—letters for instance; letters that had to be posted. Susan would say: "Did you post that letter about t' chicken food?" And Ben would say, pulling down his eyebrows and crinkling up his blue eyes: "Of course I posted it . . . must have posted it. Did you ever know me to forget to . . ." and having been feeling in his pockets would, at that moment, produce the letter and smile challengingly at Susan, adding: "What do you give 'em to me for? You know very well I never post your letters. Your chickens need more letters than our factory." And Susan would snatch the letter and cry: "You great gobbin, Ben."

It was on one of these occasions that Ben, in bringing forth an unposted letter, produced yet another and, when the rumpus had subsided, said: "Oh, that letter I got from the postman . . . met him at the gate on my way to the mill. . . . Martin's coming home . . . for a commission." He said it just like that, quietly, as if he were saying: "I told Mrs. Jardine you were going to send her some eggs"; but he was excited nevertheless. Susan had taken the letter without speaking—in itself a remarkable occurrence—and had sat down and devoured it and had then declared once again that Ben was a gobbin and life was a corker. Then she had said: "I do believe, if he'd been our own, he'd have been just the same, talking about home and a commission as if it were a hot bath—except that he wouldn't have been writing poetry in the trenches." "Oh, yea," said Ben, "he'd have been doing that sure enough . . . just t' spit of me . . . you know: kindliness, intellect, fond of dogs, a great love for women, and a bit of a poet. I've often wondered what we should have produced if we'd had children."

He stood there, swaying his rotund body gently on his

heels, looking down at her ample bosom across which a thin, gold chain ran before falling over a slight precipice, and said, quizzically: "If he'd been like his mother he'd have been all right." Susan looked him straight in the eye . . . he sometimes thought she could see the back of his head when she looked at him like that, and asked: "What are you hiding from me?. Is he coming to-day and you've forgotten to tell me? Because if he is, you'd best go and get t' car ready . . . and see that it's going . . . properly going . . . not fifty yards and then stopped, like last time." She was thinking: "Just imagine—our Martin an officer. I wonder if it's more dangerous . . . you're sure to get hit if you're in front of your men. . . . I wonder how long he'll be at home? He tells us nothing in the letter; secretive, like all his family. Has he been with any French women? I don't think he'd had any experiences before he went away, but they're hussies over there, I'll be bound; there was that girl, Fleur Armitage, in the dramatic society at Linthorpe where they did his play . . . but he never seemed to know his own mind about her . . . I think she'd have had him . . . she was ready enough to come to tea; her father writes books that aren't all they might be . . . one of 'em made me glad to get out on to the moor and be blown about by Saddlebridge wind; aye, even if there were smoke in it; cleaner than some. Happen I'm getting old-fashioned . . . one of the consequences of having no children. If we'd had a lad or two. . . Too late now . . . no use regretting . . . it wasn't our fault." Her mind paused there, and when it resumed she was wondering if Ben blamed her and was awfully grieved in his heart. He never said anything, never had, but sometimes he must be thinking he had made a bad bargain. A barren woman in China and in the Hebrew race regarded

herself, she had been told, as accursed. . . . Thy wife shall be as the fruitful vine and thy children as the olive branches, round about thy table . . . the psalm had been sung the first morning at church when they returned from their honeymoon, and as they walked home after service Ben had locked his fingers in hers and pressed her arm to his side. When the front door had been shut behind them he had put his arms about her, holding her close and buried his face in her neck and presently when he released her, a great trembling sigh escaped him. She knew that he hoped, yet was frightened of what might befall her. All through the months that followed when she had been over-tired or bilious Ben had fussed about her tenderly, insisting on her staying in bed in the mornings, or lying on the couch with her feet up. Once or twice she had had to tell him gently it wasn't what he thought. He would say: "Plenty of time for that, love." That was all. She wished he had talked more about it, had it out, asked her to be operated on, shown his displeasure. She had lain for hours beside him at night while he slept unruffled as a child, asking herself whether it was her organism or his that was at fault, and whether, had they mated otherwise, children might have been theirs. Her own mother would have talked of it being God's will, but she wasn't half so sure. God was in the surgeon's knife and, for all she knew, in the divorce court, too. She looked on God as having given to her the foundation . . . it was for her to build; and to alter the foundation itself wherever it could be bettered. If her body failed her. . . . She knew now, looking back, that she ought to have seen a physician, undergone whatever was needful. It wasn't altogether a matter for Ben; it was for her. Maybe if she had loved him more, worshipped him as she had longed to do and been

unable, she would have gone, singing, down to the vale of death and suffered agony to bring his child into the world. And she hadn't; she had done nothing—misgiving, idleness, hope that it wasn't yet too late, shyness, a thought that perhaps her childlessness was for the best, these had combined to make her irresolute. And, of course, there had been Martin. She had tried to make Martin into the son she should have borne. But there was always a small bridge that couldn't be crossed. At unexpected moments they found themselves staring at each other, hardly understanding what divided them, nonplussed, uneasy. He sang pleasantly as a boy and she had suggested he should sing in the church choir, but he had said, quickly and instantly, that he couldn't do that. Why? she asked. He had shrugged his small shoulders, and stood there with his hands in trouser pockets, very glum and solemn, half hurt and half defiant. In the same way he had refused to wear an Eton suit and mortar-board, but he was plainer in his reasons then—it would make him conspicuous, he said. She had hoped he would decline the opportunity of going to Rossall School—he needed the careful attentions of home, she thought; but he had said, to her complete astonishment: "I think my mother would have liked me to go." Once more they had stared at one another uncomprehending. She had been rather hurt. How could the child have the least notion of what his mother would have liked? His mother only existed for him in the pictures she and Ben and a stray relation or two had drawn for him. She sighed over him and concluded he had mysterious, unaccountable streaks that she would never understand. "That lad's beyond me," she would say to Ben. "Aren't we all beyond one another?" Ben would answer, looking down to the far end of the garden and

seeing something there she never saw. Ben had a composure, a wise tolerance that she lacked, and she knew it. Now while her thoughts had been rampaging and whirling he had been lost in watching a blackbird or two hopping, staccato fashion, about the dimming lawn. He turned and said: "Old Dawson's got his Rolls Royce after all. He swore he would."

"I thought every Rolls Royce engine was commandeered by the Government."

"That's the devil of it," said Ben. "You know he presented a Rolls ambulance to the hospital? Well, he took the engine out and put his old Yankee one in. Makes a deuce of a row they tell me. And he rides round behind an engine that runs like oiled silk. They were laughing about it at t' Tory club."

"I see nothing to laugh at," said Susan shutting her lips so that the corners drooped with scorn. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing"—Ben was brief; he sensed what was coming.

"A bit more masculine tolerance, I suppose," said Susan. "Drunkenness, and lechery and a bit of graft here and there . . . got to expect that . . . so long as he's enrolled as a special constable and sits on the Tribunal and sends young fellows off to France. . . ."

"He's shown a fine impartiality in sending his numerous progeny," Ben said grimly.

"One way o' getting rid of 'em," said Susan. "They were scattered all over the town by all accounts." She got up and went out. Ben sighed gently and mixed a drink. Kittle cattle, women, he was thinking. We get twice as much butter and beef as we're entitled to and she sees nothing wrong in that, and she's not above soft-

soaping the shopmen to do it. Old Dawson now; he had his points. When they sold up his weaving-shed, when he went bankrupt ten years before, he shaved his whiskers and went to Radcliffe and started again under another name. It was illegal, but he had made brass, and presently he had come back to Saddlebridge and opened another weaving-shed as 'Ralph Dawson' again, and between the two paid off his debts; and, by gad, he stood as good a chance as anybody of being the next mayor; aye, for all his progeny.

CHAPTER III

FROBISHER'S LIPS had a smile playing about them as he approached Saddlebridge. Saddlebridge was dirty, comic, old-fashioned, straggling; but he was fond of it. Its main street was noisy with clanking trams; and its shops were a medley of pawnbrokers, banks, fruiterers, tripe vendors, old-clothes merchants, jewellers, co-operative stores, richly-tiled public houses, money-lenders, dentists, chiropodists, Chinese laundries, doctors, solicitors, wrought-metal workers, musical instrument dealers, and churches and chapels. Empty shop windows were swiftly broken and old broken down buildings were hidden by hoardings plastered with garish and flaming posters. The town had a population of 120,234, a rateable value of millions, cotton mills, engineering works, hospitals, theatres, football grounds, chemical manufactories; and yet, in some strange fashion, it had never attained any dignity, and had never been taken by the world quite seriously. But it was rich in character. Its inhabitants didn't exactly use a dialect, yet workmen had a trick of saying such things as: "Us isn't on us holidays," which afforded Frobisher infinite delight. Within his boyish circle had been those who were always named in full—James William or Elizabeth Ann—and he was acquainted with others who had, apparently, no surnames but were called "Deaf Nathan" or "Soft Annie". The latter he had observed wasn't entirely daft, for when she was given a

shilling she would solemnly remark that she had another sister who was soft also. There was Old Joe who said "Amen" at the wrong times, and there was Cuckoo Nell who made her nest in divers places and had already presented the Poor Law Guardians with three children. There was Mrs. Winthrop who had been one of three spinsters who kept an ironmonger's shop and who had shocked Sisters Matilda and Judith by marrying Alfred, their carter: she still called him Alfred, with the old authority, and as often as not Alfred responded: "Aye, Ma'am." There were Sykes the bank manager who counted silver so fast that before you could say Jack Robinson he had it flying all over the bank floor with two other cashiers picking it up; William Bailey, who, in his eighty-ninth year carried his six feet one pretty erect and cleaned his own corn chandler's windows; and Tom Eckersley who collected a few rents and called himself an agent, but who made most of his money by selling "rubber goods" in great secrecy, for, in 1916, there were not 5 per cent of people in Saddlebridge who didn't regard contraceptives as the invention of the devil. Mr. Porritt, the old curate, had once declared in Frobisher's hearing that part of Tom's wickedness lay in that he prevented "love" children coming into the world; for bastards, he argued, begotten in passion and under the sky, had usually more brains and character than other folk. But it was common knowledge that Mr. Porritt had a slate loose somewhere.

Frobisher took a horsed cab at the station—they persisted in London and Saddlebridge longer than elsewhere—and jolted slowly up Deanhouse street. Every time he drove about Saddlebridge the couplet ran through his head:

Rattle his bones over the stones,
He's only a pauper whom nobody owns.

For you certainly rattled in Saddlebridge. It was 6-30 o'clock; a cold, dry wind blowing and hurling before it prickly straw-chaff from the brewery yard and horses' nosebags, and shreds of paper that collected in the gutters of Deanhouse Street in fashion unexcelled in Lancashire and without peer outside it.

Arc-lamps on the tram standards shone like small, full moons shedding radiance on bedroom windows and leaving below a certain bluish dimness. Past the Town Hall (commonly mistaken for a Methodist chapel) standing at the back of Montgomery Square like a yellow, faded Victorian lady who had retreated as far as she could; past St. George's Street, where once had stood carriages and pairs and now stood nothing better than milk floats and hawkers' barrows; past St. James's Church clock that had never been known to vary from being five minutes' fast since the Rev. Jeremy Pilcher had started a fruitless campaign to get his parishioners to church on time; past the Royal Infirmary, where the House-Surgeons, fresh-faced youths of twenty-one or so, carried out their ghastly operations for £40 a year and made their pocket-money out of post-mortem examinations which the Coroner, with a soft spot for the young doctors, ordered oftener than was needful; and so to the Circle. The Circle swung from the top of Deanhouse Street, as the blade of a sickle swings from its handle. Thirty feet below the roadway, the River Irk made a glistening black crescent with waters reflecting lights from factory windows that shone beside it. Over the river's surface, steam spurted from pipes; and into it at divers intervals there dropped waste, foul liquid from dye-works, foundries, copper works and cotton mills. From his cab window Frobisher looked down upon it. The land within the river's arc was derelict save for a set

of goal-posts and a mysterious, raised, oblong patch of water insecurely fenced which took its regular toll of young adventurous life from the slums. For the rest, Saddlebridge made sporadic attempts to turn the ground into a semblance of garden by tipping rubbish thereon and planting privet hedges on top so that you saw bushes growing above ten foot of naked filth—ashes, scrap paper, tins and rusty metal. Saddlebridge thought nothing of that. Beyond this desert rose a great many works' chimneys of varying dimensions both in girth and height, but alike in this—that they steadily poured into the sky thick or thin columns of smoke always dirty and always poisonous to greater or less degree. And Saddlebridge thought nothing of that either. Saddlebridge didn't consciously assert: "Where there's muck, there's brass"; it took it for granted.

Beyond the chimneys lay Linthorpe. Bonnie Linthorpe on th' Hill, they called it. Merchants and brokers from Burnham had residences there; so, too, had medical specialists, cotton manufacturers, bankers and the Bishop. Saddlebridge was respectful towards Linthorpe, but secretly regarded the place—as Manchester regards Liverpool, and Glasgow regards Edinburgh—as a useless satellite; as for Linthorpe, it hardly regarded Saddlebridge at all. Linthorpe played golf and rode on the moor and did a little hunting and permitted its daughters and sons to play Gilbert and Sullivan operas. The less rich Linthorpe ran a Thespians society and did Galsworthy and Barrie and a little of Shaw, Ibsen and Hauptmann, besides the local playwrights; at the tail end of whom Frobisher would have been included by some, but not all. For he had written a tragedy in one act wherein death walked the stage and far too much occurred altogether;

and a comedy wherein nothing whatever could be said to occur. However, the Thespians had produced both, and Fleur Armitage had played in both. And now, as his thoughts ran over to Linthorpe, they ran on Fleur also. She had the gifts of laughter and hauteur, and raillery and a masculine ability to rag and be ragged without hurt. When she was cornered, she would smile cheerfully at you and say: "Damn you"; which no other girl did within the rather limited range of Frobisher's experience, and which accordingly attracted him. He liked her enormously . . . no doubt about that, but he had never felt any great desire to kiss her or put his arms about her. He wasn't sure whether he liked her too well or too little.

Perhaps she wasn't feminine enough; yes, that was probably it, he told himself. He had often danced with girls he didn't care a damn for, but who clung to him so and used such perfumes that they fired his blood. There was, for example, a plump, handsome girl who worked in a box factory and sang rather beautifully. At the Mayor's dance in the Town Hall he had taken her into the Police Court and they had sat out in the Stipendiary Magistrate's red-leather chair. She had worn a yellow satin dress, he remembered, and he had nearly lost his head; she too. What had saved them was his suddenly being tickled at the thought of how comic it was to sit with a girl on your knee in the Stipendiary's chair—on the bench towards which nine or ten hours later "drunks" would be staring with mixed impudence and awe. He imagined she thought his restraint that of a damn fool. But he was immensely relieved to enter the brilliant ball-room again where they danced together with the utmost composure and parted at the end of the veleta with perfect casualness.

For the next day or two there were moments when he could have kicked himself, partly because he had gone so far, partly that he hadn't gone further. Then he forgot her. Fleur was different. When he thought of her he saw her at the end of their tapestried drawing-room, in the shadows, dressed in a wine-dark dress, singing: "O Lovely Night" in her contralto voice, and smiling quizzically at him so that the song lost all its seriousness. When she finished he had said: "You would sing quite well, you know ... if one could make out a word you say." They all laughed: she and he, and her father, who had been playing the piano, his neglected cigarette burning the keys, his long, iron-grey hair taken back behind the ears like a woman's (Frobisher marvelled that he ever escaped from the barber's with the locks intact), pince-nez perched on his aquiline nose, and his tiny imperial beard pointing like a spike, first at this note, and then that, as he moved his head to the music. Thomas Armitage had started life in engineering and gradually written himself out of it: first with character sketches in the *Burnham Gazette*, and next with the most daring north-country novels that had yet appeared. He invested Lancashire and Yorkshire people with the passions, vices, ugliness and beauty of Londoners and Parisians, and north-country folk, who readily described among themselves how coal-miners exchanged their wives, and celibate ministers helped to populate the villages, were duly shocked and put out. "It isn't decent to put it in print," they said. People shook their heads over Thomas Armitage and disparaged him until, finding that Armitage—defiantly Lancashire himself—didn't care, and that the London critics were praising him, they began to half fear and half reverence him, crediting him with sombre episodes in his life which,

as he would explain with malicious humour to Frobisher, were unfortunately groundless.

The cab jolted suddenly to the left, leaving The Circle and pulling up at The Beeches, Harriet Square. Before Frobisher was out of the cab, the broad house door was drawn open upon a glowing, lighted hall. That forthright gesture of welcome stirred him more than he liked.

Frobisher clumped up the tiled path, rifle in one hand and pack slung loosely by its cross straps on his shoulder. He was conscious of the racket and clatter he made; he would have liked to subdue it. And then he was in the hall, his hands involved in taking Ben's and Susan's, in releasing the rifle and dropping his pack which fell with a thud, and in unfastening the shoulder-straps of his great-coat. He felt half an important personage and half a schoolboy home for the holidays—a million miles removed from the man who, two days before, had been living beset by terror, monotony, blood and death. Ben was hovering round, having picked up the pack, saying: "Well, this is grand; it is that; aye, grand. Our Martin, Home! Aye!" Then he would call out: "Florrie! Here's Martin! Brown as a berry,"—Florrie being the middle-aged servant. Meanwhile Susan was examining him, asserting: "You're thinner, dear. Perhaps it'll be over before you go back."

"Heigh, lass, if it's over, he won't *go* back," cried Ben, proud of his sharpness. Frobisher put his arms about Susan and kissed her plump, rosy cheek—which he suspected of a slight obligation to rouge—and was aware of the softness of her bosom against his jacket, so that he was suddenly shy. He noticed with admiration that, as she would say, she had got herself up—there was a wave in her hair, her black silk dress had white lace at throat and

cuffs, a diamond sparkled on her hand. She had done this for him and a wave of pride swept him. "Susan, darling," he said, "we're going to have a wild time—make Ben jealous."

"The girls, you mean—Fleur Armitage and the rest," Susan said. But she was laughing rather foolishly, as a woman after her first champagne.

Ben left him for no more than moments. He brought him a whisky-and-soda to the bathroom and insisted on Frobisher drinking it as he sat in the water. Ben hadn't seen him in the bath for years, and Frobisher felt that Ben was paying him a compliment—as if he said: "We are now equals; no more stupid secrecy." Ben sorted out his blue-striped suit, found his brown shoes in the cupboard, chose his tie and suggested a shirt. Ben hummed: "If you were the only girl in the world", and declared: "Well, Martin, old chap, I've not felt like this since I married Susan." Susan shouted up the stairs: "How long are you two going to be?" and Ben went to lean over the banisters and shout down: "Two shakes of a lamb's tail, love."

They had a couple of chickens and burgundy and champagne. Frobisher told them how he wrote letters for a Cockney newspaper-seller who dictated fictitious exploits, beginning "Dear Liz—As I write this the guns is going off something shocking," and ending "I will now close as the enemy is about to attack." The last one, he related, went like this: "Captain Stokes, he comes to me and he sez, 'Colonel,' he sez (that being my latest nickname), 'we're up against it properly. There's a nest of machine guns in that ruined house over there, and they've got to be took. And who's to do it,' he sez, 'but you?' 'Who else?' I sez. 'Yes,' he sez, 'but it's sudden death to approach,' he sez; 'they've got the finest Mac-Hine gunners' (that being

what we call 'em out here) 'in the Prussian Guards,' he sez, 'and there's no getting near. Besides,' he sez, 'you've got to do this without losing your valuable life.' 'Sure thing,' I sez. 'What use will I be, dead?' Well, the up-shot of it is he leaves it to me. What do I do? I chooses three miners from Yorkshire and they digs down into the bowels of the earth and we tunnels right underneath the ruins of the house. And then, one night, when they was sitting round having their pozzy, we breaks through the last bit of earth beneath 'em and the blighters falls through on to our bayonets, tearing their trousers something awful. You should have seen 'em skipping through that tunnel, harmonizing the Hymn of Hate, the Yorkshire miners being members of a choir and keen on hearing the Prussians sing." Then Ben, ignoring Susan's admonishing glance, told the story of Bob Bury's prayer at the Battle of Trafalgar. "He went to the Bosun," said Ben: " 'Look here, Bosun,' he said, 'I want quarter of an hour off; I've got a bit o' prayin' to do.' 'Prayin'?' said the Bosun, 'who ever heard of a Lancashire chap prayin'?' 'Well, I'st 'ave to see Nelson if you don't give it me,' said Bob, and he accordingly did. Nelson said he had no objection so long as Bob understood they were going to be busy quite soon; so Bob knelt down in a remote corner of the deck, closed his eyes and folded his hands and began: 'Now then, Lord, I want a word with Thee. Tha knows I'm not one o' these natterin' devils as is allus on to Thee. Tha knows I've not axed Thee for owt for o'er twenty year. But it's an important do, like, is this 'ere. We know very well that if Th'art on our side we'st win, an' that if Th'art on t' side o' these 'ere French devils we'st lose. So what I have to say to Thee, Lord, is this: Thee damn well keep out o' this feight if Tha con, an' then we'st give 'em Hell!' "

Frobisher felt deliciously warm and happy. Ben's face was red as a judge's, and he burst into chuckles for no visible reason. Once or twice, as Frobisher's hand, brown and thin and lean lay on the tablecloth, Susan leaned across and patted it.

"How's the fishing going?" Frobisher asked. Ben exploded. "I've resigned," he said.

"Resigned?"

"Yes. You know they badgered me into being president of the 'Saddlebridge ten' who stocked that pond in Sawbutt's field? Well, they'd heard about my going off to the Hodder for a bit of trout fishing and they said: 'Couldn't we put some trout in the pond?' I didn't think much of the idea, but anyhow, they bothered me so much that I said I'd do it.

"I spent three days on going down into Wales to fetch two hundred and fifty rainbow trout and gradually getting them into the pond—quite a job it was. The trout were to stay there for six months and get their strength up. A fortnight later I dropped into the club, one night, and found three of the leading lights sitting there, pleased as punch. 'You're looking happy,' I said, drawing my chair up. 'Eh, Mr. Frobisher,' said one, 'you made a gradely job o' stocking that pond. Eh, we have enjoyed it. Do you know, I had a grand night there last Wednesday. I got fifty-four after tea.' 'Aye,' said another, 'and I didn't do so badly, neither. I took forty-one out o' Thursday afternoon. They seem mighty fond of a maggot.' 'Nay,' said the first, 'I got all mine wi' worm.' Well," said Ben, "you won't wonder I resigned."

They had music. Ben sang "The Thorn" in his tenor voice and Frobisher "The Midnight Review," superbly out of tune. Ben had produced a bottle of whisky and

Frobisher, before it was half finished, found Ben and Susan swaying off to an enormous distance. He began to consider whether he was behaving with enough gravity, whether he ought not to talk about war and the men left in the trenches. But he realized, anyway, that he was by now incapable. It was if he looked at Ben and Susan down the wrong end of a telescope. He would involuntarily close his eyes, and on re-opening them find his companions returned to a normal distance; but, as he watched them, they swiftly receded. He decided he must be getting drunk. When he went upstairs, slowly and laboriously, he had to struggle on his return to prevent himself from smiling foolishly. He had a desire to imitate a drunken man and say: "S'orlright" and flutter his hands in gestures. He overcame it, and sat there, exclaiming: "Yes" and "Yes, of course" at intervals, and with prodigious solemnity. When he went to bed his breath was sharp and fast and his heart beating at terrific speed. He wondered vaguely if it would ever slow down. His head, too, was full of pounding machinery. Next morning he was ill and vomited every time he moved.

CHAPTER IV

THOMAS ARMITAGE sat far down in his armchair, his pince-nez dangling on his old Norfolk jacket and his long, thin fingers drumming the arm of his chair. From time to time he shot looks at Frobisher from beneath his thick grey eyebrows. Frobisher had gone unannounced, taken the tram down Whitehorse Road, and wondered why it didn't leave the rails, so forcibly did it jolt and swing at the points. He had never overcome the conviction that one day a tram would topple over as he rode on top. He saw himself spreadeagled against a window, falling at an angle of forty-five degrees —two or three seconds of sickening fright until the crash of glass, with cuts and gashes and blood and shrieks and then, perhaps, nothing. He had been telling Armitage that, who had said: "Of course, you mightn't be killed, in which case, you would have added to your stock-in-trade for writing, besides getting your own eye-witness story. Your editor would be delighted." "Yes," said Frobisher, "when I'm killed, he'll certainly expect my spirit to find a telephone and put over a couple of hundred words before it wings its way aloft."

"Nothing like being optimistic about the direction of your flight," said Armitage drily. "If there's a hereafter, it's amazing that some journalist hasn't found a means of getting messages through . . . the real stuff . . . none of your half-baked vaguenesses; but some hard facts—that's

the phrase, isn't it?—as to whether a man who married twice finds both wives there and whether they all live together." Armitage, off on an ironical note, went on: "Two wives and a close friend—that is the ideal, isn't it? An intellectual wife—brains, depth, learning; a second wife to mother your children, a matronly woman, affectionate, broad-bosomed, urbane, genial, staunch; and a friend, brilliant, dazzling, passionate, to whom you turn when Switzerland or Rome are too far off and life is uncommonly dull. The alternative to that is never to marry. I am not sure that that isn't the wiser and safer plan. One wife is certainly a trial sometimes, no matter how magnificent she may be. For she will probably be deficient in humour, and desire to appropriate you too utterly. Every questionable experience you describe she will assume to be your own, and every love-speech she is unfamiliar with, one that you have addressed to some other woman. If your hero falls in love with a woman not her type she will believe—although she may deny it—that here at last is a portrait of your love, and whatever you may write concerning marriage, divorce, children and death she will examine with a powerful microscope. The best woman living is incapable of dissociating her husband from his works, and after all, I'm not sure that she's wrong. Yet you resent it. You feel inhibited, stultified, you're afraid of wounding; you belong to yourself no more; you are in a house of glass with eyes peering on you. You want to break out, fly to the mountain top, shout your thoughts aloud, and build as you wish."

"Well," said Frobisher smiling, "it seems to have provided you with a little material."

"Oh, unquestionably. Never any lack of that. By the time your hair is grey at the temples, you'll have lived

enough and had enough sorts of living to provide you with stuff to last for your lifetime's writing, and beyond. I'm thinking a book or two ahead, but before I reach 'em, I may have gone through something that demands much more urgently to be set down. Though I like best to be ten years behind my events; that gives 'em time to ripen and become mellow."

Neither Mary, Armitage's wife, nor Fleur was in. "They are in Burnham, shopping, and no doubt taking me a little nearer the bankruptcy court," said Armitage. "Mary's Irish blood has no thought of money."

Mary returned first: a tall, assured, blonde woman, with straight Grecian features, brown eyes that were queerly attractive by contrast with her gleaming crown and the figure of a girl, though she was now fifty. "Hello, Martin," she said. "Why aren't you in khaki? I shan't come out with you in those things. I was expecting you. Fleur rang up this morning, but you weren't up. Thick night, I suppose. I'm glad you haven't learnt how to drink in France."

"You seem to know far too much," Frobisher said.

"No woman can do that. We just struggle on, trying to keep up. Tom's like a jumping cracker on Guy Fawkes day —no one knows the direction of his next leap, and I daresay you're just the same." She was looking fondly at Frobisher. They understood one another. "Fleur has gone to put the car away. I usually do it, but I think she wanted to impress you with the idea that she was in no hurry to see you. And when women do that, Martin, you'd better look out." Fleur came in wearing her leather coat, her breeziest, frankest, smile, as if it were a brother she were greeting.

She had grown taller he thought, but that was unlikely, since she was then twenty-two years old. He concluded

she must be thinner. She wasn't beautiful, but her eyes of a remarkably deep blue, widely set, the breadth of her low brow, her rather short nose with finely arched nostrils to which dimples lent a note of laughter, together with her reddish-gold hair that curled naturally and was now worn bobbed gave her a remarkably handsome and commanding appearance. Her mouth was small and formed in a perfect Cupid's bow with lips unsensuous that curved readily in expressions of scorn but also of humour. She had a low voice full of music and she walked and moved with a swing, a rare and authoritative grace. Her hands were not small—they spanned octaves with ease; they were at once sensitive and strong, so that she handled a golf club or tennis racket as lightly as a pencil.

"Hullo, Martin," she said, "where's your uniform? I've been putting the car away. Mother always makes a mess of it—goes in frontwards. I like to turn her round. . . ." They shook hands and laughed into each other's eyes.

"Fibber," said Mary. "You haven't put the car away for a month! Martin, what would you do with her?"

Fleur ignored that and threw her coat on the couch. "What's for tea? Hullo, Father. You literary men been buttering one another up? Father's newest thing'll be banned—or ought to be—and then we'll make a fortune and go to live in Chelsea and I'll get a job in the West End . . . name in electric lights, wot O, and if you're very good, Martin, I'll let you write a play for me."

"You'll certainly be no good till somebody *does* write a play for you," said Frobisher.

"Well, if you think anybody can be good in a page and a half," she said, "you're jolly well mistaken. I'm at my best when I suffer from a rush of words to the mouth. . . ."

"You certainly talk twenty to the dozen."

GIRLS

"Let me finish," she cried. "Your plays are inarticulate —nobody has a sentence longer than ten words. I had a lovely part last month: twenty-four pages first time on, and eighteen next."

"Good Lord, is *that* how you judge your parts?" "Certainly," she said sitting on a buffet and shaking her curls, "she'd be a genius who could make her name on a cough and a giggle, which is about all you gave me to do as the betrayed cotton operative."

"You shouldn't expect too much, Martin," said Armitage. "What are these stage folk but empty drums that resound according as you beat them, or as water that takes the shape of the vessel you pour it into. They are built of vanity and are as children who paint their faces and wear grotesque clothes. Outside the tricks of mime and gesture and memory—and God knows they're not too good at that—they are the most ignorant people in the King's Dominions." His grey eyes were half shut in merriment below his bushy brows. "I've allowed Fleur to act solely that she may marry a Duke and keep me out of the workhouse."

Fleur said: "I'm much more likely to marry a cotton spinner. As for you and Martin and your tripe, we are your only hope of reaching intelligibility. We amplify, purify, and put in the expression and the meaning. We turn your gibberish into English, your sticks and props into characters, and your hazy notions into flesh and blood. Your minds are filled by misbegotten, half-conceived people whom we bring to life and who thereupon astonish you by. . . ."

"Astonish us is the word," said Frobisher. "The shocks of war are nothing to the shocks the Thespians give me."

"Tell us what France is really like," said Armitage over tea.

"The correct reply, according to my friend Harrop," said Frobisher, "is that it wouldn't be so bad if it weren't so bloody awful. Most of us have formed the opinion that it would be a fine idea to fight the war in England for the next twelve months in order to wake you up. When we hear of Zeppelin raids and munition works explosions, we all cheer. We have decided that patriotism is a disease and that arms and legs are small prices to give for buying ourselves out." They drank their tea in silence. "Sorry," he said. "I daresay I shall be a bright and breezy soldier again before I go back—full of pep and spit and polish." But his face was stiff and cold with emotion, and his hands trembled slightly as he raised his cup to his mouth.

"Tragic comedians," mused Armitage quietly. "We old ones no one would miss—whom life has pretty well bowled out—we shall go on, safely doing our silly little guards at the waterworks and getting starved on railway bridges, and meeting the ambulances to carry in the wounded, while the fathers of the next generation. . . ." But Frobisher was swept now by shame at his outburst. He protested he was an idiot; waiting at home was the hardest task, doing the drab, useless, unspectacular work of controlling traffic. . . . Armitage placed his hand on Martin's shoulder as he went out followed by Mary. "I know, old fellow," he said. "We haven't the foggiest notion what it's like."

Frobisher sat huddled on the couch, and Fleur came with a buffet and sat quietly at his feet. Presently she turned her face to him. Her eyes were soft and her curved mouth drooped at the corners as she opened her lips to speak. "You're grown up, Martin," she said quietly. He smiled down at her sadly. All his mirth was gone; he was thinking of Broderick, and Travers and Webster who had

been full of laughter and jest and inextinguishable spirit, and who were now quenched. She lifted her hand towards him and he took it to his lips. "If you're not careful, darling," he said, "I shall fall in love with you." He had never called her darling before, but neither made any comment. The step was taken, easily, quietly. Her head was bent staring into the fire so that he saw the lovely curve of her neck. She had taken her hand back and sat with hands clasped round her knees. They began to talk. She was driving an ambulance and taking a V.A.D. course in nursing. She might go to France later, if she could win mother over. Frobisher listened, only half hearing what she said. He felt calmed and soothed and quieted. His mouth broke into a faint smile and he placed his fingers lightly and caressingly on her shoulder. She turned swiftly and flashed a radiant smile at him.

"Better?" she asked briskly.

"Tons," he said. She was laughing up at him, and he said: "Play something, will you?"

"If you like," she said, giving him her hand. "Lift me up." He stood and took her hands, raising her. She pretended to be heavy. He pulled her up so that they stood facing one another. He thought her eyes were half quizzical and mocking. Had she been teasing him? He didn't know. Was she waiting to be kissed? He couldn't tell. He creased his eyes, frowning a little. "Play," he commanded.

"Not 'Windy Sky'," she said. "I hate your verses."

"No, not 'Windy Sky'," he agreed, "I can never tell a word you say."

"Beast," she said, laughing up at him.

"Angel," he said, stooping to kiss the nape of her neck.

CHAPTER V

FROBISHER CONTINUED to wear his blue-striped suit and to disgust Susan and Mary and Fleur by so doing. "I don't care a damn," he said. "I'm fed up with saluting." They said: "People will give you a white feather," or "You'll be arrested for disobeying orders," or "Why don't you let us be proud of walking about with you?" He said: "Shucks!" or something like that. He strolled into the *Burnham Gazette* office at night. The editor leapt up from the sub-editor's table, pipe belching, and cried: "Come along to my room!" shut his door, stood with his back to the fire, hands down the front of his trousers, and said: "Well, Martin, what'll you go in? Foot-sloggers again? You know Wilson's a staff captain in the artillery? He's the only chap who can keep the general in a good humour when he has chilblains. Distinguished himself the other day by sending up the wrong size of shells for the batteries. Young devil. Looks the part to the life. Had him in the other week. And Kennedy—you remember Kennedy—he's been made adjutant of the Pals' Battalion: he was the only subaltern who could punctuate his field messages properly on manœuvres. And you know about Blesways—the chap who used to be glad to do a theatre notice if he got the tickets for nothing—he's an enormous, gawky major with arms too long for his tunic and twelves in boots and trying to grow a moustache and the youngest major in the army

they say: not twenty-one yet and fell off his horse three times in Marshy Fields. Well, you're damned thin, young fellow. You'd no business to join the army—didn't I tell you what a young fool you were? Though I never thought you'd get out to France. Here, have a cigar and come and see the fellows. Oh, we're having a deuce of a time—you're well out of it. There isn't a reporter left in Burnham worth the name. The sporting men who are over age are doing inquests and dashing off to explosions at the munitions factory that the Ministry won't let us publish when we get. If I could sack the whole lot and bring out the paper myself, I think I should find it easier." So he ran on while Frobisher lolled in the armchair and felt devilish superior and thanked his stars he had joined up. Then he walked round the subs. table shaking hands with men half of whom tried to be cocky and a little patronizing and the other half of whom were too busy or sheepish to look him in the eye. He wandered into the reporters' room whose sole occupant at the moment was Mr. Whales who was engaged in taking a story over the telephone. Mr. Whales was sixty-one and as he couldn't hear very well he had to call out the sentences back to make sure he heard aright. There appeared to have been a fire at Leeford. Maxton of Leeford, Frobisher remembered, was a justly famous correspondent. He always concluded his stories with the same formula: "The event has cast a gloom over the whole district." Sure enough, Mr. Whales was enquiring: "What's that you say? Cast a gloom over the whole district? But I thought you said it was a fire? What? Oh, I see . . . cast a gloom. . . . Yes, I see, *when it was discovered the building was not insured. . . .*"

Frobisher was laughing quietly at Maxton's skill in employing his old formula. He turned over the pages in

the Scrap Book—an enormous tome wherein were pasted authentic and astonishing clippings. One was a detailed account from the *Cranford Guardian*, of the opening of a set of new underground lavatories with lyrical descriptions of the mahogany fittings and porcelain receptacles and of Alderman Smethurst's panegyric thereon—all written in dead earnest. Mr. Whales hung up the receiver and shook hands gravely with Martin. He expressed no surprise at seeing him in the office, merely contemplating him over his steel-rimmed spectacles, and saying: "Well, for my part I shall be glad when the war's over. I'm sick and tired of writing stories there's no room for." He spoke gently, no rancour or feeling. The war for him meant spiked stories—no more, no less. "To-night," he said, "I was sent out to cover a raid by the police. I went to the house and knocked at the door, and a woman who seemed to be wearing rather less clothing than the occasion demanded and who was French, I think, but pale and agitated, and somewhat attractive, said: 'You can't come in to-night because the police have raided us.' The chief sub. had assumed that they were raided for showing too much light after hours, whereas, on the contrary, they were devoted to darkness. In short," said Mr. Whales, solemnly filling his pipe, "it was a disorderly house." Whales had edited a paper before he was twenty—edited it and written it and published it and, on occasion, set it up in type; and when the gas company cut off their supply because the bill wasn't paid, had organized labour to turn the printing press by hand. He had reported seventeen football matches simultaneously on a Saturday afternoon, running from one match to another (they were all played on a large moor), picking up an incident and half a fact from each of the goalkeepers, getting round to each about

twice during the match; and he often recounted exciting moments arising from a pigeon, flying with match results, coquettishly alighting a few yards outside the cote with a score of vast importance tied to its leg, and refusing to come near enough to be caught.

"One afternoon," he said, "the opposition paper sent up a decoy pigeon that kept ours flying round for half an hour before she came down. The sporting sub. was so incensed he wrung its neck and I took it home and the wife made a pie of it for Sunday supper. But I never got any because the horses in a tram bolted—a happening never known before or since—and by the time I got the facts the pie was eaten." In the midst of these reminiscences the editor flung in, in shirt sleeves, to ask Martin to be sure and come to be photographed in the office so soon as he got his officer's uniform.

"We've got a picture of each of you," Mr. Whales explained after the editor had gone, "in case you get killed. The old man thinks it does the paper a bit o' good having you all out there. Every time one of you gets wounded he prints a list of the rest of you. In fact, the war gets all over the paper—great mistake."

"Never mind," said Frobisher, "it'll last so long that you'll be giving it only an item before it's finished, and the blessed Town Council meeting will be back to two columns." On the whole he felt that the *Burnham Gazette* office, in war time, was no place for him.

For the rest, his leave passed quickly. He and Fleur went to theatres and played tennis together, but he made no marked progress towards becoming her lover. The sight of her always delighted him, cheered him, made him happy, implanted confidence in him. But, curiously, that sometimes wore off; they were, perhaps, silent for a

time and he would examine himself and determine they were silent not because their feelings were too deep for expression, but because they found one another dull and had nothing to say. "Strong and silent because we've no damned brains," he would think. He would glance sideways at her, examine her critically and conclude she was not really beautiful—her lips were too thin, her nose not straight enough. Then she would laugh, her eyes would light up with mirth, her mouth curve adorably, her good humour transform her and he would sigh and say to himself: "Oh God, she's far too marvellous for me; she'll marry a millionaire or a duke, sure enough." She inspired him to be blunt, to rag her, to treat her more as a fond brother would, than a lover. "I don't like being kissed," she would say judicially, "I see nothing in it — seems silly. Being embraced is different. If I were in love I should want to be held close." She discussed the matter far too openly for his liking. "Occasionally, I let people kiss me," she said, "if they want to—saves a lot of argument. But I warn them I shall be just a block of wood." "Shut up, damn you," he would say. "I don't want to hear about all your love affairs." He pretended to be very wise about women, but she puzzled him terribly. There were moments when he thought she was aching to be possessed, but there were times, too, when he thought physical passion was beyond her knowledge. But he had no thought to make onslaughts upon her; he was, as yet, too strait-laced, and too unsure of his own mind; besides, he had placed her on far too tall a pedestal. When she sensed that, she would say: "I warn you I shall topple off." At times he had a hideous fear that, maybe, her inquisitiveness or love of excitement would cause her to fall into the hands of some seducer who would take what better men

had deliberately or despairingly thrust out of reach. So they met and took joy in one another and sharpened their wits; they laughed in each other's eyes, and as he left her and kissed her cheek he would say, maybe: "You are a darling, you know." And she would reply: "Am I? You were sweet to-night, Martin." He would go back to Susan and Ben, his mouth slightly open in a grin, and Susan would look over him critically when he entered and noting his flushed cheeks and eyes filled with mischief, sigh to herself, and think: "She's got him; aye, safe as the Bank of England, she's got him." She wasn't sure whether she liked the idea or not. Assuredly, she didn't like the books her father wrote. Who could? Who wanted to read about insanity, and old maids obsessed with sex; about despair and sordid sorrow and cruelty and crime. She said as much to Frobisher. "Tom Armitage is likely to do a lot more harm than good in the world," she said. "Viciousness written about, whether you condemn it or not, sticks —like mud thrown at the gable end of a house." Martin, in one of his querulous moods, asked her what Shakespeare wrote about except murder, torture, unfaithfulness and grief; didn't Sophocles deal with incest, and Euripides with infanticide; weren't the Russian novelists Tolstoy and the rest, concerned with decay; and wouldn't Voltaire's *Candide* be banned from Saddlebridge Library if the counsellors knew what the book contained—the same counsellors who judged the merits of pictures in the art gallery, by whether or not they portrayed women they'd like to take to the Isle of Man for the week-end. "Let's have the truth," he said. "You don't cure disease by pretending you're well, or root out slums by keeping away from them."

"I know", said Susan stoutly, "that Elizabeth Holroyd

put her head in the gas oven because she'd read about another woman doing it in Bury; and that if people read about adultery every day they'll begin to think there's nothing amiss with it."

"Well," he said banteringly, "you must admit there's a fine moral tone about *my* plays—that the wench who lost her virginity poisoned herself."

"You're not bad so far," she granted, "though there's no telling how long you'll remain so if you fall under Tom Armitage's influence. There's plenty of fine, lovely things in life to write about—childer, and motherhood, and self-sacrifice, and the sea and the countryside."

"I'll write about you, Susan," he said, running his finger down her satined back.

"If ever you put me in a book," she said, "I'll . . . I'll . . . I don't know what I'll do."

"I do believe you're descended from Queen Elizabeth," he said. But Susan took that as no compliment. Elizabeth, to her mind, was by no means all she might have been. "If she'd been poor enough and beautiful enough, she'd have been mistress of half a dozen, like as not," she said. "As it was, she wanted the pleasures of marriage without being pushed out of the limelight by a man; she wasn't right unless she'd a lover or two, and she finally cut off Essex's head because, as a handsome young man of thirty-odd, he told her spying friends what he really thought of this harridan of over sixty."

So, for the moment, Frobisher battled no more. But the fight broke out afresh over church. Susan was staunch Church of England; she dressed herself to go to church as she never did to go elsewhere; her finest silks, her most expensive brooches, her most delicate perfume were produced for her visits to St. Luke's. Her skunk-fur coat, her

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rustling dress, her proud carriage, her dominant, fearless eye, her lightly rouged cheeks—these made her a striking figure. The first Sunday at home, Martin accompanied her, learning to his dismay, as the service proceeded, that Holy Communion would follow. Frobisher enjoyed church music, the organ's thunder and vibration, the fluty, unemotional treble voices, the sun through stained windows, slashing pillars with bars of ruby and violet light. But he disliked seeing men and boys in vestments and he loathed Holy Communion. He had never forgotten the first time he took it—a gaunt, unctuous priest with long, bony fingers breaking the bread and murmuring in a sibilant whisper: "Take, eat, this is *my* Body"; and again: "This is *my* Blood shed for thee, drink and be thankful"—and all the congregation, row after row, putting their lips to the same metal vessel. He had felt faint and had much ado not to run out and be sick. Now, years afterwards, he felt no more comfortable about it. As they knelt in prayer he whispered to Susan: "I'd rather not stay to Communion." She made no sign, kneeling there with her gloved hand over her face, and he couldn't be certain whether she was rebuking him for whispering during prayers, or whether she hadn't heard. There were moments when she seemed impelled to let him know how much older she was. He sighed, thinking: "Women are primordial, superstitious, prey for witch doctors, ungovernable." When the normal service ended he rose and took his hat and gloves, and murmuring to Susan: "I suppose you are staying?" half bowed, and went quietly out. She had looked at him in mute sorrow, with, he suspected, a gleam of anger. "I'm sorry you didn't stay, Martin," she said on her return. "I should have thought that in the army you would have needed all

the strength and spiritual sustenance you can get."

"You know, Susan," he said, "I never could stand Communion."

"Why not? You're not a silly lad any more, heaving your heart up over a hair in a rice pudding." He felt suddenly cold. He said, stiffly: "My view is that the thing is barbaric, smelling of the dark ages. If God wants to help me, He won't require me to pretend I eat His body and drink His blood; the thought makes me sick. How far is it removed from idolatry? Your incense burning, your candles, your bowings to altars, your trappings, your scents: all designed to appeal to ignorance and the senses—I detest them. As for that damned young curate, why isn't he in the trenches?"

Susan, pale, a little shocked, but holding her ground, asked: "Have you ceased to be a Christian, then?"

"Christian? As to that, I'm not sure. When I ask myself what this Omnipotent God of ours means by permitting the war, with its butchery, what he means by allowing his priests in every country to spur us on, what comfort he has to offer the woman whose beloved are destroyed, and the man whose ideals are perishing: I ask myself whether we aren't fools to fall down and worship some god or thing we have never seen and of whom we have no certain knowledge whatever." He could see she was distressed. She merely said, in a low voice: "I shall pray for you." He was as quickly contrite. He went to her and put his arm round her shoulder. "I don't want to hurt you, my dear," he said. "I wish to heaven I could believe it all—everything would be so much simpler. Sometimes I've prayed with conviction and felt better and comforted for it—but afterwards I've realized it was only because I had been terribly frightened and wanted somebody

to lean on; it looked a cowardly business."

She said: "Don't we all need somebody to lean on? Isn't that what Christ wants us to do? He knows that life can whelm us over like a sea."

"It's no good," Martin said. "I've thought of all that. I don't quite know where I stand—I'm sort of living in the hope some occurrence will satisfy me either one way or the other. I suppose"—he smiled—"I want a revelation. The only thing I'm sure about is that if Christ came down to earth again he'd have a blue fit—as much at what is being done in his name as by other people. Money spent on ritual when children haven't enough to eat; priests living luxuriously while others wearing the cloth live from hand to mouth; bachelor parsons encouraging poor folk to have more children than they know how to care for because it's sinful to take artificial precautions, and rectories and vicarages occupied by enormous families that break the health and spirit of the wives because it's God's will. . . . Oh, I know I'm painting it black, but whether you paint black or white the figures will still be there." He walked away from her and when he turned after a moment or two, he thought she looked older.

"God help those women", she said, "who have too many children . . ." and then, after a pause, she added faintly, as if communing with herself, "and them who have none." Frobisher felt like a child who has blundered.

CHAPTER VI

COMMISSION MEN at Heathlow Barracks, near London, whither he went to await summons to Cadet School, fell in on the right of parade among the sick who were apportioned light duty, and the odds and ends of soldiers awaiting transfer or discharge. It was the custom to send this miscellaneous assortment for a short route march; and it was also the custom, it seemed, for this rag-tag and bobtail parade to disappear *en route*, except, that is to say, for the sergeant major in charge and one or two N.C.O.'s; because the route always led past the Heathlow Tube Station; and with one accord, when the station was reached, the parade streamed across the road, entered the station and caught the next train to Piccadilly Circus. So it came about that Frobisher saw *Chu Chin Chow* on divers occasions, and ran into a Scotsman who had served on the *Burnham Gazette*, who was now corporal in the Scots Guards and earning odd half sovereigns by escaping from Wellington Barracks to act as super at various theatres. This man, McTarrant, told him lurid tales of how Guardsmen in the ranks were the paid lovers of ladies in Park Lane and Mayfair, but as McTarrant rolled a romance over his tongue as a connoisseur may old brandy, Frobisher enjoyed his romances and disbelieved him. Heathlow life was "cushy", as Harrop said. The commission men were regarded with a trifle of awe and respect by the "old sweats" who largely peopled

the barrack rooms, so that they were spared fatigues, they didn't act as cook-house orderlies, and had small difficulty in squaring the sergeant of the guard when the pass said midnight and the clock said one-thirty. Apart from a return of mild dysentery which caused Frobisher to make precipitate rushes away from all manner of engagements and once caused him to defile the barrack square itself, he found life agreeable. It would be easy for me to pretend that he suffered excessively when he saw the casualty lists, or that he fretted at the delay in getting his commission or that he dreaded the day when he would return to France. But the truth is he did none of those things. He lived his life at Heathlow almost as calmly and peacefully as if war didn't exist, idling away the hours, smoking on his bed, reading Masefield's *Multitude and Solitude*, and trying, without success, to become interested in chess. He felt in a condition of partial mental coma; he had a suspicion that his thoughts didn't rise above diluted ribaldries, and that the slightly foul barrack rooms, slightly foul meals, and slightly foul company would, if borne long enough, poison him; and that he would develop into an "old sweat" himself. But he was not really disturbed. He knew that somehow, somewhen, wheels would turn and that the machine would pitchfork him somewhere. They did: and in February, 1917, he found himself walking along St. Giles, Oxford; and entering the gate of St. Wilfred's College. There were a hundred of them in his officer cadet company—all of whom but one had returned from trenches. That one, straight from Marlborough, was a bespectacled, studious youth with the small boy's aversion to washing his neck. Frobisher liked him for it. Frobisher hated getting up, and it was a joy to him to find that young Tennant would stay in bed till five

minutes off parade time, and sally forth unwashed. Harrop also; Harrop slept heavily. It became customary to allow Harrop to sleep on till getting on parade was a breakneck job; then to rouse him and, as he rubbed his eyes, ask him what was the matter: couldn't he sleep? Six of them shared a bedroom: Monk, a broad-faced Cockney who had done some lightweight professional boxing; Proust who had come from a Sussex village to be a clerk in London and had the shiniest buttons and boots Frobisher had ever seen; Garside of the Scots Guards, a taciturn Edinburgh man who came back from Buenos Aires to fight, and who used to permit Monk to punch him about that Monk might get fit; besides Frobisher, Tennant and Harrop. Proust and Monk were corporals from the same regiment; born practical jokers, mischievous as monkeys, irrepressible as schoolboys, and cunning as "old sweats". Proust swore he had shot Germans in cold blood because men couldn't be spared to send prisoners down to B.H.Q.; and when Capt. Moffat, lecturing on how to post bayonet men at dugouts where Germans were known to be, asked the correct step to take and expected the reply: "Post a sentry," it was Proust who cried: "Chuck a Stoke's shell down," and the lecture had exploded in sardonic laughter. "That's what we always did," explained Proust to Frobisher; "easiest way of getting rid o' the bastards." Yet it was Proust who humorously nailed a mirror a yard from the ground and put a book to stand on so that Harrop, he said, might be able to see himself; Harrop being precisely an inch shorter in height than Proust.

The liveliest regard existed among them. More than once, Proust and Monk offered to do guards for Harrop and Frobisher, and they had no objection to doing "jankers" (being confined to college), so long as they were

confined together. So that when Proust declared, one morning: "I don't think I'll shave to-day"; Monk promptly added: "All right, Dick, I won't shave either; only what are we goin' to say?"

"Say we've got sore faces—skin trouble, eczema."

With wooden expressions, they stood side by side on parade.

"Ah, Cadet Proust, why haven't you shaved to-day?"

"Can't shave sir. Sore face."

"Oh, indeed. Orderly room, nine o'clock. And Cadet Monk, too. Why haven't you shaved, Monk?"

"Can't shave, sir. Sore face."

"Indeed! Orderly room nine o'clock, and you'll both be shaved."

"Yes, sir."

Capt. Moffatt's question to them at nine o'clock was: "When do you young fellows think I came up?"

"Gassed at Mons, sir," said Monk looking straight to his front.

"I should think so," murmured Moffatt. "Seven days' C.B."

For a week they spent many hours in the college room window waving to pretty girls and spitting reflectively into the street.

It was Monk's accordion playing after "Lights Out" that led to Lieut. Bartram, formerly an Oxford don, addressing the parade thus: "It is very evident from the disturbance last night that you don't want to go to sleep so early as we had thought; in other words, your hours of sleep are too long. We are always anxious to meet your view, and as we cannot make 'Lights Out' any later, our only alternative is to make 'Reveille' earlier. 'Reveille', in future, will be at six-fifteen instead of six-thirty.

Having met your wishes in this way, we think it only fair that you should fall in with our view about 'Lights Out'. In future, 'Lights Out' will be 'Lights Out'."

Frobisher began to look on these months at Oxford as the happiest his life had held. In part, no doubt, that was due to the contrast with France. Six weeks ago he had been in the middle of it: filth, cold, misery, peril. Now: they had permission to keep fires going in their room; and every night he, whose bed was a yard away from the fire, and Harrop, who lay on the other side, stoked up and made a small furnace before climbing in between the blankets. They were so content that they almost hated dropping off to sleep. They lay awake after "Lights Out" with the fire throwing a red radiance on the walls and ceiling, and called: "What about a bit of wiring in front to-night, Proust, my lad?" And "Listen to that wind and rain, Harrop, and thank your gods you're not slugging up a slimy trench with the platoon's rations throttling you in two sloppy sandbags, and Jerry dropping a few 'five-point-nines' round you to make you step lively."

"I hope it isn't too long before we go out," said Tennant.

"'Ark at 'im!" cried Proust, "we'll all be weepin' tears o' blood, 'cept you. Me an' Monk's thinkin' o' gettin' sent back to the dirty tenth as ser'nts, aren't we Monk? A ser'nt's job's bad enough; but a perishin' officer's is worse: 'e's as lonely as 'ell, an' scared as 'ell, an' 'e daren't admit it. An' 'e goes first and walks into all the muck, an' if it's deep 'e drowns. Remember little Jones, Monk—'bout the size o' 'Arrop 'e was—('Go on, Samson!' said Harrop) we 'ad to carry 'im on our backs when it got too deep; remember 'im leadin' us up 'Ell Fire Corner, an' we didn't know where we was, an' he strikes a match to read

the blinkin' sign and . . . over they come, fireworks ole Brock never thought of . . . an' ole iron by the ton!"

"In the next war," said Monk, "they'll be chuckin' tahns at one another. What mob are you goin' in, Andrew?"

Garside said: "I think I'll go back to the Guards. Mind ye, we dae aw the fightin' for ye, but we hae got discipline. We dae know where we are i' the Guards, and that if ye're telt to dae a thing, ye not only hae to dae it, but the next fellae to ye, has to dae it, too. I dinna mind bein' i' the soup so long as ivery other fella's in it, too."

"Three cheers for the Scotties . . . right up to their guts in muck," said Harrop. "They gave you kilts, Andrew, so that you could run faster."

"Aye, faster to the charge," said Andrew gravely.

"Like hell," said Harrop derisively.

"Do you remember, Dick, at Loos," asked Monk, "where the Ser'nt Major drank his bellyful o' rum and went out at stand-to, to snaffle a prisoner, and got stuck on the barb wire comin' in and made a hullaballoo and the German mac-hine gunners shot his pants off—not to say half his backside."

"Loos, your giddy aunt," yelled Proust, "that was La Ventie!"

"Maddymoselle from Armenteers to you!" responded Monk. And then the yells twixt bed and bed went:

"On the barb wire!"

"Before you come up!"

"Before you bloody 'listed!"

"Gassed at Mons!" cried Tennant in his high boyish voice, having learnt that this was an effective finish to most arguments, at which Proust and Monk would burst into shouts of laughter.

"I observe", said Proust, "that your boots are gettin' rather down at the 'eels, Tennant. To-morrow I will get you a new pair. I sawr a nice shop in the 'igh Street to-day. To-morrow I shall go in and pick up a pair and walk out backwards, and the fella'll think I'm comin' in, see?"

"Do you perishing idiots realize", asked Harrop feelingly, "that we've got about a year's sleep owing to us?"

"Kiss yer father good-bye, love, an' tell him you'll see him no more," sang Monk; and Proust hummed: "The ole grey mare, she isunt what she used ter be, isunt what she used ter be . . . many long y-e-e-r-s ago-o-o!" A snore from Garside silenced them. Garside never made up his bed in the usual way. He climbed on the mattress, pulled the blankets loosely over him, wrapped them tight round his feet, rolled himself up like a mummy and went swiftly to sleep.

Frobisher lay for a space staring wide-eyed at the leaping fire shadows on the ceiling, wriggling his toes against the rough, warm blankets, running over some verses that had been forming in his head:

Back to the whiz o' the lead,
And the stink and the cries,
Back to the pals that are dead!
O smile in her eyes!

Back to the endless day,
And the sleepless night;
Back to my agony.
O hold her tight!

Back! Oh hell! The fellows would be stood, shivering, half-numbed on wet firesteps, on sandbags that were podgy and squelched up and down as your feet moved this way and that. He saw it clearly: a fresh night after

rain, the air washed and bright and the star-shells fluttering up, a peculiarly shiny and deep yellow. In the silence, beauty lurked. You were so tired that your eyes half-closed and you blinked; you were so sleepy that you forgot to be frightened; you just stood shifting on your feet like an old cabby, wondering how long the relief would be. Thoughts leapt home. What a gorgeous place Oxford was; St. Wilfred's, too. "Undergraduates of war." He smiled faintly to himself. St. Wilfred's, with its 400-years'-old panelling in the Hall where they dined; pretty short commons, too; rice instead of potatoes, and so hungry that they polished off every scrap of the yellow, inelegant cheese and watched one another rather closely as the vegetable dishes were passed to and fro. Harrop took salt and mustard with his cheese to make it more palatable. Each night, a section acted as waiters; waltzing to and fro in their officers' uniforms minus the stars, while the fellows yelled ironically: "Waiter, this chicken is tough!" or "What's happened to the asparagus, to-night?" or "When are you bringing that champagne-on-ice I ordered?" At the top table sat a don or two, and half a dozen undergraduates—mostly coloured men. On occasion, the loving cup was passed round, a custom which Frobisher dodged whenever, without being too pointedly aloof, he could. He suspected he was being a prig, but there it was. In his early army days he had drunk out of a salmon tin and shared it with several others. Now . . . he was grown fastidious as ever. "I wish I was hungrier," Harrop would complain. "Why do you encourage me to eat those damned cakes in the afternoon?" The cadets had opened a college canteen, where, so soon as afternoon parade was over, they repaired. Monk called it The Reformatory, refusing to admit "refectory" to his vocabulary. This, to

Frobisher, was the luxurious meal of the day. Had he not sworn, when peace came, to lie on his back the day long and pour tea down his throttle? His boyish passion for cakes had never been overcome. "Stick a bath bun on the end of his bayonet and ole Frobisher 'ud go through the Prussian Guards like a dose of salts," said Proust with enthusiasm. Harrop complained that the tea was too weak to run out of the pot, and the canteen man so slow he'd meet himself coming back if he wasn't careful.

"I shouldn't sit there too long," Monk would say to Frobisher. "A thin bloke like you—you'll cut yourself in two, one o' these days, sittin'." Yes, Frobisher accounted them great days. What matter if the staff sergeants followed you about as you drilled the section, shouting: "Wrong foot!" every time you gave an order: that Moffatt was openly sarcastic about your outpost dispositions; and that Bartram declared, after hearing your lecture on army pay, that if you paid your men in that fashion you looked like being personally in debt till the next war but one? He had begun a lecture on finance: "No soldier can be expected to fight without pay," arousing cheers at once. Harrop speaking on Infantry in defence, declared the British had been on a passive defence on the Western front for two years, while voices interrupted, "Loos before you come up"; and "What price the Somme shemozzle?" Tennant, talking on wiring said, after speaking two and a half minutes: "I could say a good deal more, but I know Cadet Proust has been swotting up this subject and I should hate to take up too much time"; and Monk, choosing to address them on Advanced Guards, spoke on Outposts and, being pulled up and pushed on to the narrow path again, said: "I'm afraid I don't know very much more about advanced

guards, sir, but I could tell you a lot about gas!" Frobisher felt like a schoolboy. The war was far away. Night Ops. were romantic, and weird, and funny. One dark night they were in the meadows by the Cherwell, marching on a compass bearing. . . . 120 yards on a true bearing of 159, to a small grassy mound. Harrop was in command. Holding his compass aslant, he stared at the dark sky for a star to march on. "The compass", he said to Frobisher briefly, "doesn't swing properly; make a note of that." Proust was chuckling in an insubordinate fashion; and to him Harrop said, "You'll go ahead and count the paces, and I hope you walk in the river." They never found the mound, although Harrop lay on his belly and looked for it, but Proust discovered a marsh through which he led them, counting fifty paces therein, and Harrop duly reported that, "In our opinion either the bearing given us was incorrect or the compass was faulty." "You should add," said Frobisher, "Or the star moved or the pioneers had shifted the mound." "Well," said Proust, "thank God you're goin' in the Yorkshire Lousy Infantry and not comin' into our Dirty Concubines Lyin' Idle. The first time you march your platoon up the line, it'll be the horse lines you'll finish in." A ghostly moon crept up behind the trees as they marched back humming softly:

Maddymoselle from Armenteers
She hadn't been kissed for fifty years,
Inky-pinky-parley vou.

And Frobisher, his eyes heavy with sleep, his arm linked in Harrop's that he might walk and doze, thought fitfully, "This for the duration . . . *très bien* . . . soon we'll wake up . . . over the top and the best o' luck . . . O hell." He roused himself as they swung through the broad arched gateway—it was like entering a mediæval castle that

night—moonlight playing on the scarred grey walls, the spires faint pencils in the cloudy sky, and harsh commands ringing round the college square.

Frobisher had suffered a good deal during his army life through failure to make his voice heard. He had told Harrop, when they reached St. Wilfred's, "Shout, my lad; that's the secret. Doesn't matter a damn what you say; make a row." He lived up to it. At every lecture he asked questions; when cadets were invited to fall out and drill the company, he duly fell out. He had a resonant voice, and it served. He challenged views on tactics, wrote copiously at the examinations, and twice in succession topped the company at the month end. He began to have a suspicion that if wars were conducted in England and without fighting, he might speedily become a brigadier. "The army", he said to Harrop, "expects nothing in the shape of brains; they seem astonished that we can write our names." So they ran the gamut of training in gas, wiring, bombing, army law, tactics, outposts, advanced guards, pay, compass, marching, sketching, ceremonial drill, hygiene, bayonet fighting, discipline, trench warfare, map reading, and musketry; and ran it with zest. They learnt various odd facts: that germs kill twice as many men as bullets; that the body is 60 per cent water; that aeroplanes have changed war from a game of cards to a game of chess; that thirteen bullets hitting the same spot will penetrate a 9-inch brick wall; and that Cromwell's Ironsides were probably the most disciplined troops ever formed. "What they don't tell us," said Harrop, "is how to stop lice from biting; how to make tea without wood and water; and how to keep warm with wet feet."

"And how to wangle a job in the Inland Water Transport," added Garside.

The days soon passed on which they had to break ice in their wash-bowls in the outhouse, and when shaving was a task of valiance. Now they frequented the river, sometimes sallying forth in small fleets of Rob Roy canoes; and, on one occasion at least, executing sorties and attacks so that Garside capsized and crept into college wringing. The amorous took larger boats and girls therein and under cover of trench-coats lay in impassioned embrace throughout the afternoon, so that Major Wright, chancing to pass that way with his wife and children, had no peace of soul till he had visited, like a thunderbolt, each company in turn and declared that every cadet so disgracing himself would be returned to his unit forthwith. Frobisher thought he had never seen a man so incensed; he entered the lecture room, stopped the talk, and in voice of mixed fire and ice, flayed them so that they sat affrighted and dismayed. Resentment at turning so many rankers, many of whom certainly could neither speak nor spell, into bearers of His Majesty's commission, flowed from his wide, thin mouth. If they weren't gentlemen, at least they might have a shot at it . . . and so forth. Frobisher accounted him, perhaps, the best regular officer he had come across. Only two days before he had described to them how, marching back from trenches in Flanders, and finding a new junior officer bullying his men into marching in fours when the men were ready to drop, he promptly placed him under arrest. Frobisher felt like getting up and cheering at that. "How can you discipline your men when you can't discipline yourselves?" the Major had asked, biting off his words like a Hotchkiss gun firing single shots.

"That's the stuff to gie 'em," said Garside later. "Mark my words, yon fellas as go square-pushin' in

boats'll leave their trenches dirty as a Glasgow tenement after a flittin', an' ivery time there's a wee bit line to be took, they'll hae to send for the Guards to dae it."

"Give us your address, Andrew," said Harrop. "I'm all in favour of sending for the Guards. After all, what are the Guards for? You go over the top once a month and spend the other three weeks in Abbeville getting over it. We live in the muck so long, we haven't the strength to crawl about, never mind fight." Yet, one of the oddest truths about them was that nobody talked seriously, in the main, of the grim life they had left behind, and were soon to taste once more. At dinner, Frobisher would glance down the long, white-clothed tables from face to face: everyone had looked at death and worse than death, been mortally afraid, and hungered, thirsted, and, for the most part, killed. He had himself killed, though that was at some twenty paces and cleanly with a rifle, and so that the bodies fell and lay in the foliage of a wood. He studied his face and eyes sometimes in the glass; nothing strange there to see: brown eyes, inclined to softness, thoughtful and of some moodiness; a chin too small, and lips arched and rather full; a nose too long, and a forehead broad and straight and square and high, dominating the rest. He could laugh and be merry as a boy who had known no suffering. He turned and looked at Harrop's chubby cheeks and fat hands—with himself, one of the last fit for a soldier. Monk had the impishness and gaminesque qualities of the street, full of a simple guile; and though Proust talked somewhat of his girls and described how he and Monk had bamboozled everybody: the Sergeant Major of his rum, the Colonel of his cargo of sherry, French farmers of eggs and chickens, and fellow-sergeants of their pay; Frobisher saw in him a

blithesome, brave spirit. Proust said his D.C.M. had come up with the rations and that he had snaffled that, too, when nobody was looking. Up and down the tables Frobisher's glance went, stopping at medalled tunics and examining the brown faces above them: some with iron-grey hair, some boyish and pink and shaven only twice a week. Not one could he, unknowingly, have sworn had been out to France. He gave it up. Some of their officers bore the mark, though; one tall, emaciated, walked with a stoop, stammered, and had a face on certain days the colour of mist rising from the Isis. "Gassed at Eeps," said Proust briefly. "Saw him nearly coughing his guts up yesterday. Like a railway ticket bent in the middle, he was." But these returns to war were only momentary; although Frobisher was garbed for war and owed his life and presence there to it, though he was being trained and schooled for battle, he often felt remote from it. He bathed in the river, professing a joy he did not find and a composure hard to uphold when diving into the bitterly cold water; he walked the banks at night, while the moon spun its radiance on the dark water, and willows flung their black tracery on its surface; or he hung over Magdalen Bridge, a deep peace enfolding his spirit. Sometimes, it is true, he found the nights so beautiful, so solemn, so exquisitely attuned to him that when the thought pierced his mind, like a ray of light entering a room, that maybe after the next few weeks he would never see it again, a poignancy filled his being so that he could have cried out. He would walk back to St. Wilfred's grieving, pitiful for himself and the rest of them. He would rap the great, oaken studded door, pass the guard silently and climb the stairs with weariness. But, as often as not, Proust would sit there polishing his boots till they shone; or Monk would be

sprawled across their study table, in shirt and breeches, writing laboriously. Their mirthful eyes as they cried: "Hello, you old sweat, drunk again?" or "Why did Maddymoselle from Armenteers wear no corsets?"; to which the other would reply: "'Cos she was tight already," would rid him of gloom.

To-night, Proust was serious for a moment. "Heard about Patsy Nolan?" he asked. "For the high jump. Caught playin' cards after 'lights out' two nights ago. R.T.U. to-morrow bright and early. Back to the line next week . . . maybe pushin' daisies up the week after. Ain't worth it, you know. Patsy says he'll be glad to be out of this outfit where he's a cross between a recruit and a bleedin' subaltern, says he'll be glad to be a ser'nt major agen. I wonder. I reckon a month in Oxford's worth a blinkin' year in France any day. Oxford for the duration—can you imagine it? Cripes!" He sat hunched over his hand inside the polished boot, the other holding the brush limply, and staring at the floor. For a moment they were silent. Then, "Like a black wooden cross or a white un, Dick?" asked Monk; and Proust threw his boot brush at him.

CHAPTER VII

End of term with concerts at which violins were played out of tune, and Captain Tavistock spun on his heels, held up his tunic skirt, shrilled his voice and sang: "Phil the fluter's ball". End of term with buying of Sam Browne belts and hours spent with "Kiwi" and dubbin, in making them look as the belts of seasoned men; end of term with mighty considerations as to which regiments they would go to; end of term with sports wherein Frobisher walked a fast mile and finished with one foot uncontrollable from the ankle so that it flopped on the paved road like Little Tich's on the stage. Frobisher and Harrop had intended joining the York and Lancs. regiment; but suddenly it was known the Sea Division was depleted, that volunteers were wanted, and that—the point which decided Frobisher—Field allowance, or "Hard lying money" as it was picturesquely called, exceeded the army's by half a crown a day; and that sub-lieutenants began life with two stars instead of one. "You'll be for it every time in the Navy," said Monk. "Bad as the Guards. Storm troops. Over the top an' the best o' luck three nights a week."

"If you're for it, you're for it," said Frobisher laconically.

"Death cometh soon or late, saith the poet," quoth Harrop. "What's the odds? And that extra seventeen-

and-six a week! My mother would never forgive me missing that."

"What about us, Dick?" asked Monk. "No fear, shipmate," answered Proust. "If there's any wet trenches, they'll get 'em in the sea mob, and they swim canals with bayonets in their teeth. It's all right for ole Frobisher. He never was a bleedin' soldier, so it won't be 'ard to make a sailor of 'im; but for you an' me, Monk—no, Dirty Concubines for us every time." Frobisher was thinking, "Let the decision come soon, once I'm out again. I couldn't bear years more of it. This winter would have put out my light. I was at the end of my tether. So let it be swift. Over the top—and swift; death or wounds—and home again." He had hoped to top the company again in the final examination, since those highly placed were to go to the Sea Division; but he didn't. Nevertheless, both he and Harrop were high enough—the first ten or so—and they took off their white bands, packed their kit and prepared to go home pending commission. "My one hope", said Harrop, "is that they'll forget all about us. Know one fellow who waited six months, and if the b.f. hadn't written the War Office he'd have seen the war out in Hebden Bridge."

Throughout the preparations for going home, Frobisher's thoughts were much occupied with Fleur. They had corresponded a good deal, though not regularly. At times they had written daily when some argument possessed them or when she sent him verses for his opinion. She had a mystical streak, a touch almost of second sight. The occult and spiritualism interested her enormously. She swore she believed in fairies and he never knew whether to take that seriously or not. She was as a child in many of her ideas and her simplicity. One day she

would accuse him of being too young to read a certain book, and the next, display a naïve, trusting and rather foolish belief: such as that everything happens for the best. Whether her verses were written to him, or for him, was another puzzle. She wrote sometimes to an imaginary lover; beginning, perhaps, "Do you hear, my love, my love?" and he wondered whether he were the love she meant. He, also, wrote a sonnet or two, one of which began:

> You say you love my letters, then shall I
> A scribbler be till death doth still this hand,
> And strew my brain with dust; till this dear land
> Shall take me to its arms and let me lie. . . .

He was conscious that both of them were carried away by their pens and said more than they thought or meant. They were both imaginative: both capable of creating visions, of idealizing people, of setting up idols to worship and of finding their visionary folk almost as real and satisfactory as people in the flesh; more satisfactory, indeed, in that they created what they longed for and were never disappointed in them. He recalled an experience of years before, when, after a long correspondence with an absent boyhood friend, they had met and found themselves tongue-tied; their warmth in letters was vanished; they were strained and awkward. He wondered if it would be thus with Fleur. She was fond of writing accounts of how this or that young actor had taken her dancing or to the theatre or how a strange young man of ravishing handsomeness had occupied the same railway compartment and paid her marked attention. Frobisher was more annoyed and disturbed by these stories than he cared to own; he half believed she was merely rousing his jealousy or showing him he wasn't the

only pebble on the beach. Somebody had written a song for her and she flatly told him, "You're not the only one who writes for me, you see"; and apologized in her next letter for being a beast. She was always ready to blame herself more than she deserved and to make herself out a person of lower standards than she was. If he were magnanimous in one of their quarrels by letter, she would draw a spidery little figure, all legs and arms, and write: "You make me feel this big"; and she had a likable trick of writing different parts of the letter in different sized handwriting to express her shyness over various passages: as when she would begin, once in a while, "Darling MARTIN" to show him, he presumed, that she was far more sure of the "Martin" than the "darling". Women were the devil, he reflected. Talk about being changeable! They became transformed merely by their surroundings. If you were to put your arm about a strange girl in a drawing-room she would be shocked, whereas on a dance floor she would appeal to you with her eyes to be held close, though you had hardly seen her before. Similarly, one who would be almost prim in Burnham would be promiscuous in the Isle of Wight: stern with the young man who had courted her for years, and, maybe, seduced by him who had flirted with her for three days. In one of his plays, entirely without purpose or serious meaning, he had written a line: "All women are more or less bad"; and had been astonished at the giggles and glances that had been bestowed on him in consequence. Was he in love with Fleur? He had the romanticist's desire to love so fiercely and completely that no other beautiful women would exist for him; and it couldn't be done. No matter how filled his thoughts were with Fleur, he had only to be smiled upon by a pretty girl in a tea-shop or the street, to

study her with considerable attention and delight. So he couldn't be in love. A pity; but there it was. Nevertheless, it was with a swiftly beating heart that he took himself off to Linthorpe the afternoon after he arrived home. He had slept fitfully—had been within a few inches of drawing down upon himself the dark veil of sleep and had then been pricked into wakefulness by he knew not what and lain for hours thinking—had seen himself taking her in his arms and kissing her so that her cold, curved lips broke beneath his and grew soft and kissed him in return.

"Hullo, Martin," she said cheerily.

"Hullo," he said, "slacking as usual. You ought to be driving a ten-ton lorry."

"Ten ton fiddlemyree," she said.

Within him, he heaved a small sigh. It was no use. They would go on ragging one another. "Let brotherly love continue," Garside would say at St. Wilfred's when a row was imminent. The phrase chased through his mind, and seemed to hit things off. Mary remarked on his darkened eyes: "You don't look much like a soldier," she said; but Fleur ridiculed sympathy. "If you go the pace, you must pay the piper," she said. "Don't tell me," she said. "And Oxford full of cadets."

After tea they walked over the moor. It was raining quietly, but she had said she liked the rain on her face. She took off her hat and the fine drizzle hung in a thousand dully glistening diamonds on her hair. He said, "You'll get cold or something." She shook her head like a dog and tilted her face up. "You're stubborn as a donkey," he told her, and she laughed delightedly. She strode along in her brown leather coat, her cheeks gradually growing pinker, her stout shoes taking thin pools in

her stride. "The rain will make my hair curl," she said presently.

"Is that all you think about?" he asked, admiring the curve of her rounded cheek.

"Certainly," she said. "What else? You're taking me to the theatre to-night, aren't you?"

"I don't know," he said. "Am I?" They laughed at one another.

"Damn it," he said, "I do enough route marching without having my feet walked off by you."

"Do you good," she said. "Where were you last night? Don't look as if you had much sleep."

"I'm ashamed to say it," he said, "but as a matter of fact, it's your fault. Damned if I could sleep for thinking about you."

"That's strange," she said, "I was the same. At least, I slept—I always do at first—but about five I awoke and never got off again."

"Well," he said, "as long as we're both idiots, I suppose it's all right." They walked on in silence for a space.

"Are you disappointed in me?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. Why?" She turned to him, a quizzical and rather puzzled look in her eyes.

"I don't see how you could help being," he said. "I'm a poor stick."

"Bosh!" she said heartily. "Don't be an idiot—turning a microscope on yourself. I never do. I'm terrified—I daren't."

"Oh, don't imagine I'm modest . . . " he said.

"I don't," she broke in. "You're mighty full of yourself. I often wish I was as sure of myself as you are."

"I'm modest in a way," he said, trying to explain himself and realizing he was amusing her and liking to do it.

"In fact, I'm too modest by half. But I know what I can do and what I can't do. I know, for instance, that self-abnegation is nothing in my line. A sense of justice is one of my strong points, and that involves being just to myself. False modesty—no good to me. I know that at writing verse you can wipe the floor with me, and that while I'm plodding along the ruts and wangling out rhymes with a rhyming dictionary you'll be soaring aloft; but I also know you write far too facilely and that you don't always understand the words you use. In short, apart from your marvellous sense of rhythm and imagery and a semi-mystical gift, you are no damn good at all. You can't think and you have no concentration—you are exactly like a kitten that starts off after a ball of wool and sits down half-way to wash its face."

"That's perfectly true," she said, laughing, "even to the washing. You must admit I do wash."

He examined her profile critically. "You'd be handsomer", he said, "if you painted a bit."

"I never paint", she said, "in the daytime. Loathe it."

"I know," he said, "but you should. You're inclined to be blue about the gills, when the wind's keen. In fact, I strongly suspect that beneath this outward appearance of virility and strength you're just an old crock, and that the fellow who marries you will spend half his time cossetting you."

"It'll serve him right," she said.

"I must admit," he said softly, "I should enjoy it." He glanced at her and found her looking at him with dimples near her mouth and her eyes softened, but she said nothing.

"I shall expect you in your war-paint, to-night," he said; "your jade frock and your black velvet wrap with

white-fur collar. I propose to polish my belt for you." The two things he liked best in the world were playing golf and going to the theatre. As they sat in the stalls of the Burnham Little Theatre, he said, "The only thing wrong is that it isn't my play."

"And that I'm not starring in it," she added.

"Idiot," he said affectionately. "How could you be sitting with me here if you were starring in it?"

She sat with a Spanish shawl about her shoulders, breaking into unrestrained laughter and applauding. "Watch this girl, Martin," she would say. "She's terribly good—new since you were here before," or, "Here's old Charley. He's sweet but he never knows his lines. Look! He's seen us! Bet you he makes that bow to me—always does when he sees me."

"Don't flatter yourself," he said, "Charles is bowing to me. I've promised to write a play for him one day. You're with me, to-night, remember. Last time I saw you round the back, half the fellows threw themselves round your neck as if you were betrothed to them."

"Pooh!" she said, "it doesn't mean anything."

"That be hanged for a tale," he said. "You're a very dangerous young woman, it's my belief." So they went round the back at the interval and Charley put his arm round her and said: "Now take the picture before the train goes. And look as if you were going to enjoy your honeymoon, darling. Just a little more smile, dear. That's right. Now, all ready!" and he kissed her cheek and asked: "Well, love, and when are you coming to work here? We could do with a girl like you. If you don't come soon, it'll be all off between us. Well, how do you like me as the grocer with the lisph? Ith a nicth part, ithin't ith? I can't give you a drink, Martin, because it won't run to

it. Things are rotten. Just before I came here I had a job in the West End at thirty-five bob a week—aye, thirty-five bob, me lad, and glad to get it."

"Second act, ladies and gentlemen, please," called the boy outside, knocking at the door.

"There we go," said Charley. "I must go and do some more grocerin'. Eh, but's it's nice to see thee again. Now don't let Fleur lead you astray. She's a bonnie young woman. If I were nobbut twenty year younger. . . . Eh, dear. . . ." He bobbed off, talking his assumed Lancashire.

They sat close together in the taxi driving back to Linthorpe, his arm passed through hers and his long, slender fingers locked in hers. He leaned his head on her velvet cloak, feeling deliciously happy and extremely young.

"You're terribly beautiful, darling," he said.

"Am I?" she asked. Her voice was changed; it was gentle and dreamy. "I wish I were," she said. The cab lurched and bumped over uneven pavements, and swung round corners causing them to heel over first this way, then that. He released his arm and placed it about her, so that his fingers encountered the softness of her bosom. Fire began to creep through his blood. His brain grew misty. He placed his other arm across her breast drawing her to him. She resisted a moment, turning her cheek to him to kiss; but he was not to be denied. He pressed her face, gently but firmly till her mouth was beneath his lips. He kissed her again and again, her mouth, her eyes, smoothed her eyebrows with his lips, and buried his face in her neck. She made no response; she lay there quiescent, as if she said: "Take what you must; perhaps I owe you this." He strained her to him; then, sensing her passivity he slowly released her. Quite suddenly warmth drained out of him; he was cool, and a little stolid.

His mind was a medley of contradictory thoughts. Would she have been disappointed had he not kissed her at all?

"You're a strange creature, dear," he said.

"I know, Martin." Her voice was its old self once more, clear and pitched rather low. Apparently, the incident had left her unmoved. Had she adopted her "block of wood" attitude? He said, a little bitterly, "I can imagine nothing less sensational than kissing somebody who is bored to death."

She said: "I can't kiss you, Martin, when I don't know whether I love you or not."

"Well," he said, beginning to smile, "it might be one way of finding out, you know. Isn't it Squire Western who says Sophia will know whether she loves Tom Jones when they have been abed together. Not", he added, judicially, "that I have any intention of asking you to go quite so far."

"I hope not," she said laughing. Their spirits were restored. They sat arm in arm once more, rocking in the cab, watching the flying lamp-posts, and staring across country to where a string of lights wound zigzag up a hillside, stars against a background of dark, cloudy hill. He said: "Women are adorable; but, my God, you *are* a damned nuisance. When I am away from you, you fill my head; and when I am with you, I ask myself what on earth there is in you to worry myself over."

"I believe", she said, "you are a born philanderer. I wouldn't trust you a yard." He considered that gravely. "I should be an idiot," he said, "and certainly no artist, if I were insensible to women's beauty. I can imagine myself, even if I fall head over heels in love, still being attracted by other women, especially, maybe, the opposite

types to her. If you write a poem to a sunset, you are not unaware of the sunsets that come after."

"You probably never ought to marry at all," she said. "Your style is bound to be cramped, isn't it?"

"The question most likely won't arise. It won't be long before it's 'Over the top and the best o' luck' again'." So soon as he had said it he was sorry. He felt her fingers tighten in his, and they rode the remaining quarter of a mile in silence. "I'm sorry," he said, helping her out of the cab, "I didn't mean to rake that up."

"You don't rake it up, darling," she said. "It's always there." She said "darling" without hesitation. He thought it was the first time she had addressed him thus. His eyes shone with delight, and he wanted to dance and skip about.

After supper he said he would walk home. The stars were out and the night was cool and bright. Fleur accompanied him a few hundred yards down the road. He glanced at her as his custom was, taking delight in the sight of her. Once he saw a tear glistening on her cheek. He stood, bent over her hand for a space when he left her, and pressed her fingers fondly to his cheek. He stood watching her after she had left him, and tramping up the tram-lines towards Saddlebridge, lines began to form in his head. Next day he wrote them down.

When you had gone,
I watched you striding down the lamp-lit road,
Your hair wind-blown, your face upturned to broken sky;
You looked—ah God!—a conqueror of all the world,
But on your rounded cheek I knew that tears were drying.

When you had climbed
Up to your room and on the tumbled pillows lay
And rose and flung the window wide and leaning out

NORTH WIND

Dimmed moon and stars with glorious, burning face,
Deep in your troubled breast a heart cried out.

When you lay still
Your curly hair in lovely disarray,
And lashes dark across your tired eyes drooping,
An arm rebellious flung across the sheet
And restless limbs sunk into calm at last,
Ah then! I think I stole and stood beside you
And brushed a kiss upon your quivering mouth.

CHAPTER VIII

FROBISHER AND Harrop travelled down to London together feeling rather proud and rather self-conscious in their first-class compartment. Their belts were ridiculously new, despite all the "Kiwi" lavished upon them; so were Harrop's trench boots which set off his sturdy legs handsomely; and their breeches, inclined to be stiff, and the stars (two) on their shoulders, and the naval ring round their sleeves. "We're the first blokes I've ever seen dressed like this, anyway," said Harrop. "Blasted harumphrodites, eh?" Their valises were labelled "Sub-Lieut. R.N.V.R". They walked about London. "You take the salutes," suggested Harrop. "You're higher up." But there weren't many salutes to take. Soldiers looked the other way. Frobisher felt they ought to do something about it, but what? You couldn't run the whole lot in, or even take their names. Perhaps he was being an ass to worry about it. Discipline was unquestionably slack; officers weren't what they were. He felt subdued, rebuffed. "I've got a hunch", he said, "that two stars aren't all beer and skittles. Half of me says the lads are right to take no damned notice of us, and the other half wants to put the devils under arrest."

"Don't say *you're* going to turn out a martinet," said Harrop. "They only gave you your commission because you were so damned awkward and argumentative, and

they wanted to be rid of you. What's the odds? Me for a quiet life."

"It's a damn funny feeling," said Harrop, next morning, "my stomach's like that of a raw recruit or a kid going to a new school. Don't feel much like breakfast." Harrop took the valises to Waterloo in a taxi, and Frobisher, after calling in Fleet Street started off on top of a bus. A few minutes later the bus stopped, people made ejaculations and climbed downstairs. He had been enjoying the sunshine, lost in speculations on what lay ahead at Redstock. Now he looked about him. The conductor came upstairs, like an Old Bill cartoon, and said: "We don't go no farther, sir."

"Why?"

"Why? 'swelp me. Look at the aeroplanes—Jerries they are." Silver planes in the blue sky, in precise and beautiful formation, were coming up the line of the Thames. As Frobisher stared, a few puffs of white smoke rose beneath them as if a miracle were being performed. A moment later, a very faint boom was heard.

"Do you mean to say", he asked, "that we're not going on because of that?" He felt incensed. Good God, there wasn't a snowball in hell's chance of being hit.

"What do *you* fink?" asked the conductor, disappearing.

Frobisher went downstairs. "Where can I get a taxi?" he asked angrily. "Must get to Waterloo—train to catch."

"Don't suppose anybody'll take yer," said the conductor. "But yer might try a couple o' hundred yards dahn the road." This was absurd—missing a train through an air raid. He hurried—broke into a trot. A greengrocer's wife cried: "Hi! Joe! Look at the orficer runnin'." Frobisher heard, flushed, and dropped into a walk. Apparently she thought he had the "wind up". He found a

taxi; the man said he would take a roundabout route. "So long as you get there," said Frobisher. They got there.

The six months that Frobisher spent at Redstock with the Sea Division were an odd mixture of amusement, discomfiture, interest, and monotony. Certainly, he was not happy. To begin with, the C.O. and adjutant were marines and, so far as he could observe, no remarkable amount of affection was lost between Marines and the R.N.V.R. men. Sub-Lieuts., R.N.V.R., were senior to lieutenants of Marines—so that Frobisher, commissioned last week, became senior to, let us say, Marc Antony, commissioned last year, a patent absurdity. The Sea Division was designed to be a sort of amphibian force—to fight on land or sea; it was "a somewhat misbegotten brain-wave", said Harrop, of a politician, Mr. Westerton, who sent it adventuring to Antwerp and afterwards Gallipoli. But by the time Frobisher joined the division, they were ordinary and yet not ordinary infantry. For they clung to their picturesque but amusing and somewhat stupid nomenclature. So that Frobisher had the devil's own job in trying to remember to call his sergeant "Petty Officer", and his privates "Able Seamen"; and when his petty officer reported "Two men adrift, sir," he almost inquired whether he was trying to be funny. Similarly, the adjutant would inquire: "Are you going ashore this week-end?" Dining-rooms were "mess decks", the parade ground outside the orderly room was the "quarter-deck"; they toasted the King sitting down, and they used the naval salute with the palm of the hand towards the eye instead of towards the enemy. They bought naval officers' hats and wore khaki tops to them, but this in secret and on jaunts to Bournemouth or elsewhere only—the caps were prohibited on parade. Fro-

bisher was proud of being associated with the navy, and proud of the division's fighting record; but he was angered and dismayed by the fashion in which they were described as "recruit officers" and drilled and physical-jerked by officers who, often enough, had never "heard a shot fired in anger," as the phrase had it. The depot, in the summer of 1917, had, indeed, a surprising number of "specialist" officers who stuck to their jobs in Redstock, while wounded men from the front came back, convalesced, grew strong and returned to the trenches. Harrop said: "Makes me sick, this place. I'd rather be in France any day. There are poor sods with four or five wound stripes up being mucked about and bullied by blighters not fit to clean their boots." Frobisher agreed. There was, for example, Sargent: already wearing the Military Medal; who had a squeaky voice on parade and wits that never worked swiftly unless bombs were falling round him. He was made to look a b.f. by men who had never seen a trench. "Old sweats", and hard-bitten men back from France resented, not unnaturally, a good deal of the spit and polish and tightening-up that went on between leaving hospital and sailing overseas. They were taken through the bombing, gas, wiring, and the gamut of intensive high-pressure preparation (which turned out soldiers like growing vegetables under glass) almost as if these men from the front were men newly called up. They kicked against it when they could, they wore caps at rakish angles, they paraded, a few of them, with string or cord in place of rifle slings, they were frequently slovenly and, when being marched to the railway station, on draft, were often tipsy or impertinent—especially those who had been in "cells" for crime and brought out to join the parade. It was a young officer's job to march them to the

station; Frobisher hated it. No joy here, among the draft, no willingness, no exaltation—at all events among those "going back": the war had lasted too long; disillusionment was rife; no doubt, many a man argued that if you shouted "—— the Colonel" and were put in the guard room for it, you escaped France for a space anyway. Frobisher was sorry for the men; able to understand their point of view, and yet sick at occasional want of discipline. The first time he inspected the battalion guard coming off duty, he crimed the lot for dirty rifles; the first time he marched a firing party off to the shooting range, they smoked without permission before they were entirely clear of the parade ground; and as punishment he marched them "to attention" most of the two miles there. The men weren't to blame, perhaps. Sixty or seventy young officers had newly joined—some severe, others appallingly slack. Platoons and squads had different officers, in some instances, two or three times a day, and conduct that went unnoticed by a platoon commander in the morning was punished by another in the afternoon. For one period of fourteen weeks Frobisher enjoyed himself. He had a platoon from the moment they arrived in civilian clothes —among them a London policeman and a B.A. of Leeds University—to the moment they marched off on draft. One was a negro, a ship's fireman, who suffered from sweating fits and whom Frobisher constantly sent off parade to go sick. The man marched about with perspiration streaming from him, hopelessly out of step, Frobisher walking by his side coaxing him into the proper stride. It was like teaching a child to walk. When they went to the shooting range, somebody had almost to hold his hand. Another man couldn't close his left eye, and had to have a handkerchief tied across it; a third marched about

with feet at an angle of eighty degrees, as awkwardly as if his naked feet rested on razor blades; and a fourth, who became Frobisher's batman, had the bent shoulders and the drooping shoulders of a semi-invalid. He swore he was 100 per cent fit when he joined up a month before, but had been "done in" by inoculation. But the rest were keen, alert, and were transformed with startling rapidity. They went out, finally, with all the tricks of killing or maiming in their heads, but far too little hardening and stamina in their bodies; glib, machine-made, mass-production soldiers; he felt pitiful towards them. The smartest soldiers in camp were boys—A4 boys—mostly of eighteen, who had been through this fourteen weeks' intensive training again and again. They had the precocity of boys and the "old sweat's" ability to scrounge and wangle. Issue one with a rifle, and within half an hour the butt trap, where his oil can and pull-through should have been, was occupied by some patent knife, fork and spoon that a fond aunt had sent him. They "moved" so swiftly in arms drill that, if you weren't determined, their three motions in "slope arms" ran into one. They formed fours in a veritable hop, skip and jump. They marched too fast, they won a good many of the battalion prizes for shooting, bombing, wiring, and Lewis-gunning; they read Infantry Training and Musketry Regulations in their spare time; they had a special break in mid-morning for bread and dripping and cocoa (going off grinning and winking at the unfortunates still at work) and when they paraded with downy whiskers on their faces, they remarked with stiff expressions belied by dancing eyes: "I've not started to shave yet, sir." "No, but you'll start to-day," Frobisher would reply, endeavouring to be stern.

Monotony, fun, depression, excitement; so it went on. He was rebuked by the colonel in front of his men and flamed with rage; he sat, as officer of the day, on the colonel's left at dinner, and found him courteous and fatherly; he was asked by the sarcastic adjutant whether there was anything he *had* learned at cadet school, and he was congratulated by the adjutant on having trained the battalion's best squad; so it went on. He felt so awkward in the mess that he loathed entering it; he sang in the mess and was popular. He tramped the Downs in solitude watching the thin, trailing blue smoke rising from ruddy cottages, seeing the ploughman's team breast the hill, and humming softly to himself pieces of *The Shropshire Lad*. He gathered wild raspberries and filled his pockets with mushrooms. He would lean over a gate and stare long at the fields parched in the sun on an afternoon all blue and white when the sheep bells broke in metallic dull chinks on the air; or he would walk back to camp at night when the stars were out, and the moon sailed mellow and grinned satirically in a sky so magically perfect and silent that he was hurt by it.

And then his name went up for draft. Harrop said: "We're for it, Guy." They went together and stared at the typewritten notice. His name was sixth on the list—a badly typed list, faint and irregular. Fourteen of them were to go. He took a breath, held it, and let it go quietly. Trafalgar Battalion.

"I see the bloke's down who was thought to have pinched those silver cigarette cases," said Harrop—a reference to a flashy young man with plastered hair—"thank God he's not coming to our mob. Let's go and draw revolvers." They went to the Musketry Officer and drew rather long and ponderous Webleys.

"Why the hell can't they give us automatics?" asked Frobisher querulously. "These hold half as many shots, are twice as big, and so damned stiff that you'll have to shoot a brigade of rats before they work properly."

"Their best use", said Harrop, "is when you've no bullets left; *bon*, my lad, for wiping a Jerry across the jaw with." Frobisher was elated and excited. He looked with slight disdain on the "specialist" officers, still safe in their jobs; and he felt tautened and cheered at the thought of irksome drills and severe, yet petty, discipline being left behind. Besides, there was six days' leave to be had. He and Harrop had arranged to spend three days of it in the north, and the rest at Bournemouth. He found he was the calmest and most indifferent of those at Saddlebridge, dear to him. Susan was breaking a little, sorrowful-looking, anxious. "It's not fair, Martin, dear," she said. "There's plenty who've never been to France at all."

"I'll be back with a 'cushy' wound in no time," he said. "You see if I'm not." He truly felt, at that moment, there was no doubt of it. At the back of his mind was a remembrance how a small wound on his hand, caused by falling off a bicycle in camp, had refused to heal—how time after time the hospital orderly had had to plaster it with mustard ointment to break it open and permit the foul matter to emerge; he had thought then, "If I get wounded, I'll be finished, sure as eggs." But now, talking to Susan, he pushed the thought aside. He felt stimulated as if by alcohol; he wasn't himself. He saw Fleur only once and forced himself to talk and be noisy and boisterous. He took her out to dinner and drank too much wine; embraced her in the taxi in a vigorous, heartless fashion, and pretended to a devilment he had a struggle to maintain. He saw her staring at him curiously, puzzled and

doubtful. He was saying to himself: "I'm not going to be serious; it would be fatal; what's the good of hurting her; damn it, I ought not to have seen her at all; I loathe good-byes, always did; it's like having fancy funerals which tear people to pieces and thrust swords into their wounds." But the wine wore off and left him dull and a little stupid and very quiet, and partially exhausted. They had been to a theatre and found the play flat and silly. The whole night had gone wrong. Fleur's father and mother were at a party and their house was deserted except for Bertha, the maid, when Fleur and he entered the drawing-room. The fire was throwing bars of light on the red, satin couch. "Let's have some tea," she said, and he suddenly felt that tea was what he wanted more than anything in the world. "Thank you, darling," he said. "How did you know? I've never wanted it so much since I came home." They sat side by side and she gave him her hand and he held it tight.

"Why did you, to-night?" she asked. He could hardly hear, her voice was so low.

"I was frightened, darling," he said. She turned her face to him, that proud, haughty face with its lips that were wont to curl defiance, and he saw that her eyes were brimming and her mouth moving and beginning to tremble. And then they were in each other's arms and he straining her to him. She sank back into the shoulder of the deep couch, and for a space he lay with his arms about her and his face buried in her dress and bosom. They lay motionless, but so deeply was he stirred that a paroxysm of emotion passed through his being and when, after a moment more, he softly withdrew himself, he was trembling. She sat up and leaned her head against the side of the couch, and they sat unstirring as if dead until Bertha

brought tea and lit the lamp. But he was thinking "Now I belong to her."

He felt that he couldn't stand seeing Thomas Armitage and Mary; something new had happened to him. He wanted to rise and say good-bye to Fleur and go out into the quiet road and walk about. He wasn't sure he wanted to think; his mind had stopped. But those feelings passed. He held the hot delicate cup in his hands and sipped slowly with eyes half closed. As he drank, his hands lost their nervousness and presently he turned and looked at Fleur. She smiled wanly and looked sorrowful. He couldn't tell whether she knew what had happened to him or not; but he thought, probably, she sensed a development had occurred; maybe in both of them. She was too intuitive, too sensitive, too responsive to his moods to be unaware. Presently, he moved to her and took her hands and pressed them to his face. He felt unsure of controlling his tears. He could have cried. At the back of his head, a voice was repeating, "What a b.f. I am; like a kid; don't be an ass; pull yourself together." And gradually the voice hammered a stronger feeling into him, solidified the trembling shifting mass that he imagined his nervous system had become. She asked: "Shall I see you again, before you go?" He said: "No, darling; Harrop and I go south to-morrow. It's better, don't you think? We can't go on saying good-bye, you know. It's too damned painful." He was smiling now, faintly. "I think, you know, it would have been better if I hadn't come."

"Oh, much," she said mechanically.

He rose. "You'd better get a V.A.D. job at St. Saviour's Hospital, Oxford. When I'm wounded I'll ask to be sent there. God, wouldn't it be great? To stand with you on Magdalen Bridge on an autumn evening,

GOVT. GIRLS

with lamps glowing like molten steel and leaves chasing down the road, and trees in the valley, green and brown and gold. . . ."

"Was she so divine", she asked with a sorrowful attempt at mirth, "that it's stamped on your brain?"

"She was," he said, "she had hair and eyes exactly the same colour, a sort of golden auburn, flaming. She was a barmaid at the Royal and said she didn't see how any man could be faithful to one woman. Proust was so mad about her that when his brother got married and Proust had to propose the bridesmaids' healths, he kept referring to barmaids instead of bridesmaids, like this: 'If the world were run as it should be, every barmaid would be a bride—after all, it's the first step on the road. I doubt if any best man was ever blessed with such handsome barmaids'—Proust said they were in fits of laughter and he couldn't make out for a long time why his speech went so well."

"If you're going to be indelicate," she said, "you'd better hop it."

"Going, my sweet," he said gaily. "By the way, you know the Sea Division are going to man monitors on the Belgian coast, don't you?"

"Fibber," she said.

"Well," he said, "I shall probably find myself dredging the La Bassée canal or something." He had roused in himself a feeling of irresponsibility, the sort of feeling in which, as a boy, he had dressed up and play-acted long past his bedtime till Susan had chased him off upstairs saying: "You'll cry before you've finished, young man, laughing so much as that." He strode up to Fleur, put his arms about her, said laconically, "Good-bye, darling," kissed her, and said: "Don't forget that Oxford hospital,

will you?" She didn't speak. He turned near the door and saw her standing like a small child with a hurt in her eyes, her hands crossed on her breast. He ran back and enfolded her and stood quietly with his cheek pressed to hers.

"I won't have you taking risks," she said.

As he walked back to Saddlebridge, he thought, "Her father was right, then. Women take a proprietorial interest in you. 'I won't have you taking risks.' They want to possess you, as parents try to possess their children. Fleur, one of these days, will govern a matriarchy."

He was glad to get away with Harrop. Ben and Susan and Fleur—those most dear—were a . . . yes, a race apart. Maybe that was callous; still, their lives could be seen stretching out ahead of them, like a broad high road. His life—would it go round the next corner? A sunset to him could be heartbreakingly beautiful. In his morbid youth he had written "The last eight hours"—the eight hours of a murderer waiting for the hangman. This morbid streak had full play at odd moments. This war business was unjust.

"God's teeth," said Harrop, "I felt during leave that I was attending my own blasted funeral sometimes. There'll be two blokes missing in the next war—me and the fellow who's chasing me with a bayonet. Damn funny thing happened the other day. Midgley and I were walking across the moors and stood near a stream in a small valley wondering whether we'd risk a wetting by jumping it. Suddenly there was a hell of a row behind us, the pounding of hoofs, and down the hill came a white horse—white as the driven—going hell for leather, but no lather or sweat, as you'd expect. It went past like a hurricane

and shot up the hill and disappeared. Somehow, we were scared. Suddenly Midgley said: 'By God, the White Horse of Hembersyde!' The horse is legendary—a sign of death to the blokes who see it. Well, we jumped that stream and dashed up the hill. The moor stretched flat for miles. But there was no blasted horse on it."

"You were drunk."

"We weren't," said Harrop, "but by God, we did our best at the nearest pub."

"Did you really believe it was a spirit?"

Harrop pondered. "I dunno. Don't see why not. If there's life after death, it seems reasonable to suppose ghosts are knocking about, and that if they are, they should on special occasions, be observable. I can see no sense in believing in eternity and decrying spiritualism. Which reminds me, did you know Proust is back at Oxford, wounded? Had a letter from him. He and Monk didn't go to the same batt. after all. Old Proust got to the Essex Regiment. Says he got to the depot and the Colonel sez, 'Proust. So you're Proust. Well I'm damned. There's a draft to-night and out you go, toute damn suite.' So Proust goes overseas with a draft he has to watch to see they don't disappear down drains and overboard on the ship. He and Monk never knew a thing compared with those lads, he says. Soon as he gets to Echelon B, they say: 'Proust. Oh, yes. Up the line, my lad for you; we've heard about you.' So up the line he goes and the C.O. says: 'Oh, Proust, eh? There's a wiring party to-night, Proust, and you're just the chap for it.' So old Proust goes out on a wiring party within three or four days of leaving Oxford, gets a 'cushy' one in the arm, comes home, is asked: 'Where do you want to go, Proust?' and he replies, 'Oxford; it's my home.' Off he

goes to Oxford and within a fortnight is climbing over the hospital wall and going square-pushin' with his barmaid friend. Well, the wound was O.K. far too quickly to suit Proust and when he couldn't swing the lead any longer he goes back to the depot. 'Proust?' says the depot Colonel, 'why, we sent you to France a month ago.' 'Too true,' says Proust; and they promptly shoot him back, once more, overseas. At Echelon B, they say 'But we sent you up the line.' 'Too true,' says old Proust. So off he goes back to the same battalion. 'Proust of all people,' exclaims the C.O. 'You got pipped off before you'd properly got here, didn't you?' 'Too bloody true,' says Proust. 'Well,' says the C.O., 'let's see if you have any better luck this time.' So they send Proust out on a night patrol, and one of his lads says, 'Hi! sir, what'll I do? I've got a bomb in each hand and I've took the pins out of 'em both an' now I want to go to the latrine very bad.' 'Chuck one away,' says Proust, so the kid chucks one, but not half far enough, and Proust gets a piece in the leg. And off he goes back to England. 'Which town do you want to go to?' they ask him. 'Oh, Oxford,' he says. 'It's my spiritual and physical home.' And as true as I'm sitting here, old Proust is back in that hospital opposite St. Wilfred's College for the second time inside three months. And next week he thinks his leg'll be fit enough to climb the garden wall."

They spent three days at Bournemouth: bathing, dancing, concert-going, and walking up and down the promenade. One day, as they walked, Harrop said: "I know a chap who's always sick on the promenade at Blackpool. Fact. Like being on a ship, he says. He watches the sea rising and falling, and that makes him ill."

"Never knew a chap like you, Harrop," said Frobisher.

"You ought to have been a damned reporter. You're always finding strange, unaccountable things."

Harrop glowed. "Yes," he said, "I am. My mother was telling me about a quack doctor she once knew who died. No, this wasn't in Wakeford. He ought to have been a doctor, but he couldn't pass his exams. So he set up as a surgical instrument dealer and did well—so well, that doctors used to buy his instruments and when they got hard up, pawn them back to him. This fellow also did illegal operations, and when he died, what do you think they found in his safe? Why, a lot of blank death certificates signed by half the doctors in the town."

"Why the hell *should* women have babies they don't want?" asked Frobisher savagely. "Nobody quarrels—at least nobody with any sense—at your preventing a woman from conceiving; but if, after accidental conception, you remove what's there by surgical operation, that's criminal and you're liable to go to quod. That's funny, isn't it? In about fifty years we'll have made it legal. I was talking to a bacteriologist at an inquest one day—this is another strange thing: said he knew of half a dozen safe ways of committing murder; reckoned half the suicides by death in the gas oven were just as likely to be murders as not; you hit the person over the head with a padded mallet, say, and when they're stunned, you put their head in the gas oven, and write a note in their name saying you're committing suicide. How often does the coroner prove the writing is that of the dead man or woman? Not once in fifty times. Another dodge is to give people a sugar-coated pill of some acid that burns a hole in your bowels releasing the poisonous acids; then the hole heals up and the post mortem finds nothing. A third is strangling a sleeping person with a bolster and

then staging an apparent hanging—leaving the same incriminating note."

"Talking of killing," said Harrop, "if, under the pier, to-night, you come upon a scoundrel raping a girl against her will and you put a bullet through him, you'll be hanged, I suppose. But if, next week, you shoot half a dozen perfectly decent Germans, you'll be in danger of getting the D.S.O. I say, what damn pretty girls those two were. Good Lord, they're the two I saw in the lounge this morning. Let's go and talk to 'em."

Dorothy, with whom Frobisher danced later, was small and rounded with a *rétrousse* nose and a rosy mouth. Her sweetheart had been killed on the Somme, but she was bearing up again and said her only regret was they hadn't been married before he went out. "Apart, altogether, from the pension," she said, "I feel—oh, you know." Frobisher said, looking down into her eyes, half-appealing and half-laughing at him, "Yes, of course." They strolled arm-in-arm up and down the darkened promenade; Harrop in great spirits in front, giggling and humming:

> This fusilier was a gambler
> And reckless from his heart,
> He said: "Wave your money good-bye, boy
> 'Cos it's mine before you start. . . .

Frobisher was trying to imagine it was Fleur who was on his arm, but he couldn't. Dorothy stopped at a promenade shelter and wondered if it were too chilly to sit there and watch the moon over the sea. Frobisher said he was afraid it was. He felt he was being extremely disappointing to Dorothy. But he couldn't help it. A line of Fleur's was running in his head—"Can you hear, my love, my love. . . ."

CHAPTER IX

Two or three days later he wrote to Fleur from camp. "Fleur, dear, a hell of a thing has happened. I don't know whether to shout Hurray! or sit down and weep. I've been turned down by the M.O. on account of valvular disease of the heart. Two of us in the same boat. We'd packed our kit and arranged for the car to take us to the railway station, had several of our final drinks and then trotted up to the doctor to be passed. Just a formal business. I'm certainly no less fit than when I slung heavy gas cylinders about in France. However . . . up we went. The doctor prodded me about with his silvery nozzles and didn't seem to like the tune he heard very much. Did I get short of breath he asked? I said I supposed I did, sometimes. Some muttering in a corner, more listening to the tune by another doctor, shakings of the head and then, 'You can't go overseas. I'll write to the adjutant.' He didn't tell me why. The adjutant opened the buff, shoddy, sheet of paper, looked at me a little down his nose, I thought, and said: 'You've got V.D.H. Do you know?' I said: 'No. What's V.D.H. anyway?' Then he told me. This afternoon, after Harrop and the other fellows had gone—I felt a traitor somehow, seeing them go, young Harrop trying to grin and be cheerful and wave his cap; we were to have gone to the same battalion, you know. . . . I hung about like a lost soul. Then I went down to find a doctor in Redstock. I

knocked at the first one I came to. More listening to my tunes; then he said I had no disease, but I certainly wasn't fit for France, and so on. All this was yesterday. Last night I got drunk—at least, as drunk as I ever get. The adjutant asked me to-day how I'd like to be messing officer. I said I wouldn't. Hideous job—buying wines, and grub; being cursed for everything that goes wrong. Soft, cushy business. Then he mentioned Lewis Gun officer. Yes, I said I'd like that: training the men to shoot. But I'm to have a travelling medical board first, to see if I'm really rotten inside. Am I glad and do I hope I'm a sort of invalid? On balance, yes. I've just been looking at the sky and thinking 'So I'm not going to be snuffed out—not yet. I'll see you stars winking up there, and the dawn break, and leaves turn brown in autumn; and evenings grow carved and still just before sunset. And I'll see Fleur again for sure, and old Ben and Susan will dance a little jig; and'—oh, my dear, it's marvellous. Write and say you're glad. I don't care a damn if I drop dead next year. I'd have sold my chance of life for a year, certain, anyway. Would I? I think I would. Anyhow, I'm not going to fall dead; not unless your arms are there to catch me. All of which is silly. But I've a right to be silly to-night. I'd better shut up before I get maudlin. Good night, Fleur, dear. Sleep well. I shan't. Best love. Martin. Do you ever feel your fate is mapped? I've often had an inkling it was. I never in my heart believed, for example, that I'd be killed; and I always thought I was meant to do something out of the way. Now you're laughing at my conceit. Laugh away, darling. I'm really going to bed now. Good night."

She wrote back. "Martin, dear. I've read and re-read and read again. What about the sonnet now? Oh, my

dear, I've been skipping about, blissfully ignoring your heart. I hope your heart's so bad they'll never dare to send you abroad. They grow better in time, you know—that is, except the broken ones. And I believe those mend, too. My secret belief is that you're nothing but a magnificent lead-swinger and wangler. You've told me how clever you are at it. I believe you've been eating soap and heating thermometers with matches and swallowing cordite (that's it, isn't it) and sleeping with your feet out of bed, and running up high hills to give yourself palpitation. And I don't care a damn if you have. Because I seem to have all the primitive woman's desire to protect her young. And I don't care a bit for patriotism and dying for your country. I'd much rather you lived for me—well, not me especially, but Susan and Ben, who, poor souls, nearly broke their hearts when you callously went off to Bournemouth and left them earlier than you might have done. You *were* callous, you know. I rang up Susan. She said you ought to come home and go to bed for six weeks, as that was the only thing for weak hearts. I said, first, you hadn't a weak heart. (I couldn't bear the sound of it; it sounded so decadent and cowardly); and secondly, I said we didn't want your heart to get better; at least not I; else they'd send you off to France toute suite. She thought I was quite mad, and no doubt I am; no doubt we all are. Anyway, I feel very happy to-day, and I want to know when you're wangling leave. A crock like you can't be the least use in the army (or army *cum* navy), and the sooner they pitch you out the better. Not that I want you to lose your uniform. (Another confession of the primitive, I suppose.) But I love seeing you dressed up, tho' I can't imagine you ever being a success among guns and bayonets on a barrack square. (In the trenches, yes,

tight-lipped and pale among the bursting shells, walking about like a spirit that can't be hurt. My! how swollen-headed you'll be now!) We've got two new lieutenants in my ward, one with the D.S.O., and he's asked me if I'll go to the theatre with him so soon as he's able to get out. I've said yes; but you needn't worry, dear, because I'm dreadfully afraid he'll never get better—at least, not while the war lasts. He's terribly sweet and good—one of those quiet men who won't say anything about what it was like, who look as if they were school masters or clerks and who, you find presently, have won V.C.'s and things. I went up on the moor this afternoon and sat with my back against a stone wall and watched the peewits wheeling and listened to their crying, so disconsolate and despairing. It was a perfect day, sun hot, and a quiet wind drifting the white clouds by overhead. This would be heaven, I thought, to sit on a high hill with somebody you loved, and enough noise and rustling of nature to make you feel happy and sad both at the same time. I was tremulous inside, and my body seemed too small to hold it all, and then I found I was crying. I let the tears run down my face and fall on to my dress. I felt like a small child and I just went on crying till, with closed eyes, I nearly fell asleep. Did I say I'm glad you're an invalid? Oh, Martin, I am. Best love. Fleur. I think you should go on eating cordite till you've had the medical board."

He sat in shirt sleeves waiting to be called; the other side of the wooden-hut door were the doctors—men who could mould his Fate like gods. He went in and lay down on a table. He was quite calm. The lieutenant-doctor's steel receiver moved about his chest, pausing, making small leaps. Then came the major, saying little sharp

"Hum's" and "Ha's" as he adjusted his tubes and looked profound and listened. Next he gripped Frobisher's wrist and stared out of his window. Frobisher was wondering vaguely what the verdict would be. He ought, he felt, to be very excited about it, but he wasn't. He was the centre of the drama, and he might have been in the audience. Disappointing. The colonel was over him now with a black tube topped by a black disc. The tube hopped about his chest like a blackbird, and the colonel's port-wine cheeks came near to him as he popped an ear on the disc. The colonel, he saw, was a heavy smoker, his white moustache stained yellow with nicotine. Perhaps he, too, had a heart. In that case, he would know. . . . Frobisher got up and tucked his shirt into his breeches, feeling a little awkward but making his movements very deliberately. He was more excited now, and excitement had a trick of slowing him up.

"France long, Mr. Frobisher?" asked the Colonel.

"Eighteen months," answered Frobisher casually, feeling the period was ridiculously small.

"Um! Um! Agreed on your decision, gentlemen?"

"Yes, quite."

"Home service *only* for you Mr. Frobisher. Good morning." The Colonel smiled at him and ushered him out. It was like being shown out in Harley Street and here were no guineas to pay. The army had its points. He walked out into the sunshine and down towards the orderly room, swinging his stick. He returned a few salutes in a confident and lordly fashion.

He went to Hayling Island on a Lewis Gun course where the fellow-officers in his squad said: "Come on, the Navy!"; where he ranked senior to full army lieutenants

of a year's standing; where he didn't get enough to eat; where he grew conspicuous for asking awkward questions on tactics and advanced guards, and answered examination papers at such length that they gave him a distinguished certificate, in despair, he supposed, of reading through them. On certain occasions he had to imagine himself a brigadier and dispose of an imaginary brigade of troops complete with umpteen machine guns. He enjoyed that. War in Hayling Island was great fun. He began to have serious ideas of the army as a peace-time profession. He played billiards with an officer in the Devons, and they both talked to one another in Cockney. They passed a school with a notice-board "School for the sons of gentlemen", and an Australian in their squad said: "That wouldn't be up five minutes where I come from. Sons of gentlemen, by God!"

But other ideas were moving in his head. If he were unfit for France, he saw no point in living a life he detested at Redstock. So he called in London and saw FitzAlan, an old newspaper colleague who had recently been appointed Director of Special Intelligence at the Ministry of Re-conditioning. Special Intelligence was virtually Publicity, but the pundits of Whitehall hated the word and all it implied, and after appointing men to give information, saw to it they gave as little as possible. Frobisher didn't know that then; but he wanted to write instead of drill, and the one seemed to him about as good a way of serving England or, alternatively, of getting time over, as the other. FitzAlan hadn't a job, but had a small brain wave and sent Frobisher with a note to the Director of S.I., Ministry of Ordnance, a learned, amiable and fatherly man who said Martin was just the fellow he wanted; and he would apply for him to be seconded (if

that was the word) to the Ministry. Frobisher returned to Redstock in good spirits, took over the Lewis Gun School, and for several weary months walked about it trying to look dignified and authoritative. The instructors were so good and the work so monotonous and lonely that he nearly died with boredom. At first he walked about in rubber-soled boots, but so often came upon squads unawares and found himself facing small slacknesses and misdemeanours that he took off the rubber and made a row with his feet so that everybody heard him coming and spat and polished accordingly. That method worked much better. Sargent, who had been at St. Wilfred's with him, and had been to France and was back with the M.C., came to see him. Sargent was walking with a limp, with three medals up. "Hullo, you old sweat," said Frobisher, "where did you snaffle the other medal?" "Oh," said Sargent, "we did a show in the Trafalgar and only two officers were left in my company, and brigade insisted on us finding places for two M.C.'s—so what could they do? Looks damn pretty, too, doesn't it? There's a girl down in Redstock says if I get a bar to it she'll come to Bournemouth for the week-end; she looks worth it, too. I went home this last week-end and the town gave me a bloody sword. They did, really. Didn't know what the hell to do with it—I've never had a sword, you know, and forgot to get a sword-frog. I'd a stick in one hand and the sword in the other till I put it on the floor out of the way. It was damn funny. You know that I ran away from all my nonconformist relations and joined the army as a private in the regulars and they all used to go to chapel and pray for me? They bought me out once and I ran away again. Well, they all turned up at the ceremony and were hellish affable. I told the folks in my speech

how rum saved everybody's life in the trenches and I was informed afterwards I'd 'damned this and damned that' all through my remarks. When I finished they had to cheer, out of politeness. There was a Mayoral reception and *beaucoup* wine, and I'm afraid I had a lot. It finished with me making another speech, trying to present the sword to the Mayor (the Mace-bearer had been following me about with it all afternoon) and my saying; 'You have it, old chap. Far more useful to you than me, I assure you.' But the newspapers did me proud: pictures and speeches I'd never made. Very posh! You're a clever lot of sods, Martin, you newspaper chaps. Come and have a drink at the morning break. The C.O.'s mighty polite since I got back. . . . 'Always knew I had the makings of a fine officer. . . .' Marvellous what a piece of bomb in the backside and a bit o' coloured ribbon'll do for you."

One night, Frobisher had to lecture to a company of countryside volunteers, and motored out in a van with a couple of guns and talked to grey-headed yokels about "lines of fire" and the first "catch", and drew with chalk on a blackboard, and talked learnedly of gun stoppages. When he'd finished and encouraged them to ask questions, one said: "What I bean't able to onnerstan' zur, is why it be, they bean't able to mak' a gun wi' half a dozen barrels so as to spray ee shots like a duck-gun. It do seem a waste like makin' one barrel so 'ot 'e won't fire no more arter a few minutes shootin'." They gave Martin coffee and some sandwiches, and the Vicar, a rubicund man with a gold cross dangling about his corpulent belly, said he didn't think the war could last much longer now; no, he didn't think so. His nephew in the Guards said they were able to push the Germans here, and push them there, and almost every night Jerries came over and gave

themselves up. How did Frobisher think it was going? Frobisher said he was afraid he didn't know much about it, but he'd heard that at Passchendaele those of our fellows who hadn't been shot had been largely trampled in the mud so that others made a bridge of their bodies and walked over them. The Vicar was considerably taken aback and bade Frobisher a frigid good night.

The circumlocution offices of Whitehall moved slowly and it was months before Frobisher went to the Ministry. He continued to tramp the Downs and cycle abroad to such lovely villages as Milton Brebner—this village of one street sloping down to woodland, with houses set behind greensward on each side, with a clear rivulet running in the gutter, and an inn embowered in honeysuckle. It was the sort of place he saw in his daydreams, when he pictured himself and Fleur living somewhere too beautiful to be real. Always when the day was lovely, when he enjoyed a perfect sky, or the sight of ploughed land with birds flying over it, when he came upon the sea very blue, its edge striking sand in a white lacy fringe—his thoughts went flying to Fleur, and he would heave a deep sigh and mutter: "Why the hell isn't she here? Why, in God's name, are we always a hundred miles from people we want to be with, and always in the middle of the devils we don't care if we never see again? Is it because we're not meant to be perfectly happy —that we should never be able to stand it, that we should expire of some exquisite malaise?" He had a suspicion that after a month he and Fleur would strike something explosive in one another—and would go up in the air. Susan had once said: "You're too much alike, you two. Too temperamental, too full of yourselves, and able to do things too easily; too spoilt."

He had grinned and said: "Don't be jealous, Susan." But . . . maybe, there was something in it. Certainly they argued and quarrelled enough, struck sparks off one another; but they revelled in it. Once Fleur had written: "If you'd been here when your letter came, I'd have thrown a gramophone record at you." And he could see her doing it. Somehow, he felt he wouldn't have minded —that she'd have been magnificently angry and afterwards magnificently sorry. Well, that was all right.

He said good-bye to Redstock and took up his quarters in the Hotel Astoria, occupying an office that had been a modest bedroom, and living in rooms in Barnes. His chief, Mr. Bardew, sat on one side of the desk and he sat on the other. Mr. Bardew ran this Ministry job in addition to one or two others and was always in his place when Frobisher arrived about ten o'clock. Martin felt this was decidedly improper, but he was much too lazy and Mr. Bardew far too good-natured to make any change. Mr. Westerton was then Minister of Munitions, and Frobisher was immensely pleased to discover that the Minister was no better than he himself at getting up in the mornings. The knowledge gave him a warm feeling inside. Occasionally, when he passed Mr. Westerton's door he caught a glimpse of him still in bed with a dispatch box on his knees; and when they arranged for him to make a tour of the British munitions factories with special trains and so forth, the tour got badly out of gear because Mr. Westerton wouldn't get up early enough. Frobisher was more disposed in his favour by this fact than any other, although he noted with approval that the Minister wrote his minutes in red ink—they ran like streaks of fire across windy documents—and had as great a contempt for paragraphs prepared by other departments for the Press

as he and Mr. Bardew themselves. It became one of Frobisher's tasks to make these paragraphs intelligible, and when the majestic *Guardian* wrote a leader-note saying that if all Government department pronouncements were as intelligible as the Ordnance ones, etc., etc., he felt himself in danger of getting the O.B.E. He had another proud moment when the Deputy-Minister, having forbidden the issue of one of his articles on tanks, used the article as a speech. But it took him a little time to get into his stride. At first he was slightly overcome by the cool insolence and snobbery of white-spatted gentlemen who drawled over the telephone from department to department, and who were following the very new fashion of wearing horn-rimmed spectacles. They were so cocky, so pleased with themselves, so imperturbable, that for weeks he floundered and felt he was making an idiot of himself. But shortly he was able to be peremptory as they: to use their surnames to them with easy effrontery, to look down his nose with studied skill, and to write minutes with acid politeness. But he had to grant that these officials were adept at saying what they wanted to say—neither a word more nor a word less; that they worked long hours (often returning to the Ministry after dinner at night), and that Mr. Westerton himself could make more decisions in an hour than most men in a month. He had no hesitation in saluting Mr. Westerton in his best naval style when they met on the stairs; and, Mr. Westerton, on his part, returned it with the utmost politeness and apparent delight. "The old military blood at work," thought Frobisher. Food was a problem. He was entitled to draw naval rations but declined; he was virtually a civilian and would live as they did. He was pale and attenuated. He lunched on a grilled herring or

fish-balls, and fought small wordy battles with Miss Featherstone, a middle-aged spinster of his department who had formed the conclusion that he was in a galloping consumption and could only be saved by the use of her meat tickets. She would approach him in the canteen and deposit half a meat ticket by his plate and murmur, "You are to have meat; I insist." He would rise and say: "Really, Miss Featherstone, I couldn't. I dislike meat. I . . ." and blushing, and stammering and trying to keep their argument from the ears of those nearby, would press the tiny particle of cardboard back in her hand. Even Mr. Bardew did not escape her. He, too, was a six-footer, braw, and of goodly appetite. It was her mission, she felt, to save them from themselves. Doubtless they were as children to her, but it was extremely trying to Frobisher. Women, indeed, were just entering on that phase of adventure which has culminated since in their breaking endurance records in motor cars, their flying alone to the Antipodes and elsewhere, speaking thoughts aloud, finding spiritual, as they once found physical, sustenance in gin; painting in imitation, not only of the women of Ur before the Flood, but so like prostitutes that it is impossible to distinguish the one from the other, and dressing to inflame men, under the pretence of emancipating themselves. Frobisher found it all by turns attractive, and damned annoying. He side-stepped on Tube platforms to avoid being trampled on by lusty young women, he waited patiently in a queue to use the Ministry lift, only to see, as he was stepping inside, a couple of secretaries with the sweetest smiles skip past him and take his place. The lift-girl—in the game, no doubt—smiled sweetly, too, and murmured: "Next time please." He was at a loss to know where these women came from. They flashed past

him like shadows, invading tobacconists' and demanding "A box of Abdullas, quick" even when his very mouth was open to ask for twenty Yellow Seal. Matches were another problem. The match-making spinster of the Victorian Age might be said to have had a gay life compared with the match-making man of 1918. He walked about with a hunting look in his eyes and his fingers clutching his cigarette-case on chance anybody lit up in his neighbourhood. One day their secretary set fire to a box, and bringing their tea, said: "What do you think? A box of matches has just fused. Such a lovely swizzle!" He said: "Don't you know we have already bought enough tobacco to last a twelve-month in an endeavour to lay by a spare box or two."

The war seemed a long way off. He blundered one day into a very secret meeting where several knights and several other knights-to-be were joking and discussing high policy and laying the foundations for much ordnance and their own future honours. After five minutes, he knew he was in the wrong meeting, but the assembly was so secret that he hesitated to disturb it a second time by leaving. So he sàt on the edge of the circle trying to look profound and grave and to answer nonchalantly the challenging stares directed at him. But no one asked him what the devil he was doing there, and after remaining till his head ached, he withdrew without disorder. He wrote pieces of verse for the War Aims Committee, and articles for the dailies; took a party of journalists round the munitions factories of the north and tried to make up by his own diligent note-taking for their disappointing numbers. He refused invitations to lunch at the Carlton from writers who wanted to make use of him; and, when his first small book was published, deprecated its being

sent by one or two white-spatted gentlemen to their editor friends for review. "If it's any good, they'll notice it," he said, "and if it isn't, well. . . ." He was very young indeed.

The war seemed indeed a long way off; until, one morning, he observed Mr. Bardew in mourning and rather greyer than usual. "I hope nothing . . ." he said. Mr. Bardew looked up, his grey eyes more limpid than was common and his voice softer. "My boy David," he said. "He's joined many another gallant fellow." Mr. Bardew's eyes dropped to his writing pad, and his fingers closed round his pen; but for a long time the pen never moved. Frobisher said, later in the day, "I've asked for another Medical Board." Mr. Bardew looked up. "Oh!" he said. Frobisher thought his eyes were wet.

He had been turning things over all day and now the decision was taken he suddenly felt cleansed. After all, what was he doing? Wasn't he one of the "Cuthberts of Whitehall" as the Northcliffe Press called them? Did the fact that he had been out to France and was now pronounced unfit make any difference? He decided not. If he were fit to go back and didn't go, then he was no whit better than those who had "dodged the column" from the beginning. It wasn't a question of how valuable the work was you were doing (and in his own case the worth seemed small), but of how great was the risk you took, how far you could permit other men to bear what you refused to bear. He must start over again, offer himself for whatever England wanted to do with him. He grinned to himself as he thought how he would curse himself once back in the trenches, how the other fellows would ask him why he was such a bloody fool. You had to come home it seemed, to establish close touch with the war. Miss

Featherstone was upset and righteously indignant when she heard what he had done. All her stifled, motherly instincts that had never had a chance, rose in her. "Why doesn't Webster go?" she said. "He's here because he stammers—couldn't give orders on parade. Well, let him receive orders instead. The Ministry's full of fit men. You ought to go round the munitions works telling them what war's like, urging them on to make the shells—I'm sure you could make lovely speeches. I'll suggest it to Mr. Bardew." Her eyes sparkled, her face lit up, she would not be gainsaid. He said: "You don't settle your own conscience by looking after other folk's. What they do's got nothing to do with me. I feel I'm swinging the lead, and till I've settled it one way or the other, I shall have no peace." He was thinking of little Harrop, killed at Passchendaele within a fortnight of going out: Passchendaele, where he, Frobisher, ought to have been. He was contemptuous of himself, writing articles and using telephones. Was there more than a handful of men in the Ministry who didn't care more for their own careers than winning the war? He thought not.

So he had another medical board where the doctors smiled benignly at him, wanted to know why he had asked for a board before the stipulated time; and, human nature being what it is, opposed the patient's opinion, came to the conclusion that Frobisher's health was worse than ever and reduced his category to C2. Miss Featherstone was overjoyed. She made him accept half a meat ticket two days in succession.

CHAPTER X

A CONSIDERABLE part of his life was lived in a half-light akin to that prevailing in the streets; although everything he did was designed to prosecute the war, and he was a tiny part of the war machine, the atmosphere was so far removed from that of the battle-fields, that it was life in a different world. His eye ran every morning down the casualty lists for familiar names, but he never encountered any. He read battle news with the scepticism born of knowing how little it resembled the truth. He went to the Ministry like a clerk going to his counting-house. He felt the war would go on for ever.

Yet the Ministry was majestic in its range of activities and almost god-like in the amount of control it exercised. To begin with, it controlled nearly 1,000 workshops and 1,000,000 men and women engaged in producing weapons, gases, explosives and anything else that would encompass death. Skilled engineers, Eton college boys, jute mill workers in India, London clerks in their evenings, South Wales miners, titled women in shell factories—all were hard at it. Basket-making, silk spinning, the study of fatigue, the problem of women in shipyards, the question of proper breaks for morning tea, the allotting of cow cake to farmers, the training of technicians at universities—all came into the scheme. From riveting ironclads to collecting horse chestnuts, from

writing verses to spur the workers on to granting them exorbitant war bonuses—all for war! No wonder the Ministry spread from hotel to hotel and that Frobisher and his department were shifted about from one lot of rooms to another—and usually received their first intimation of removal when furniture men in aprons came and stuck gummed labels on the desks and filing cupboards, or the charwoman, coming to sweep out, said: "I 'ear yer movin' agen, sir. 'Owtel Merrileone, I did 'ear. They won't let yer be, will they?"

Still, if you send 2,000,000 shells a week to France, besides 7,000 tons of explosives, you must expect some small upset. Gretna Green, once famous for marriages at the blacksmith's anvil, was now notable for high explosives. Tanks, coal, tin, optical glass, fertilizers for agriculture, picrid acid, trinitrotoluol, phosphorus, distilling, machine tools, dyes, aeroplanes, steel helmets, coke ovens, oils and fats—the Ministry controlled them all.

When a brilliant mind conceived the thought of sending a team of women footballers from a shell factory to play games in Paris, Frobisher had to submit the idea to half a dozen knights and ejaculators of "Um's" and "Ha's" before it could be decided on. Would the dignity and reputation for beauty of English women be lowered? Would the French think we were taking the war frivolously? The French, more than other people, would be horrified at the sight of women playing football. Oh, it was very gravely debated indeed!

Frobisher went round lots of munitions works—saw women whose hands and faces were yellow from chemicals, heard Lancashire women refer to monster shells as their "babbies", saw men in khaki working at lathes, and heard foremen talking laborious French (picked up from

small handbooks) to Belgian workmen. He began to look at massive iron gates with eyes which wondered how many shells they would make, he wrote with enthusiasm about a tank being worth 1,000 men; and when he learnt that even in the early days of the war, near Neuve Chapelle, we fired as many shells as in the whole Boer war, he felt inspirited. Figures, figures! The Germans asserted that the Allies, in Champagne, hurled 50,000,000 rounds of one sort or another against them in three days. And in the Alps, Austrians were rolling rocks down on the Italians. Pouf!

Just as he worked like a clerk, so he looked forward to seven or eight o'clock in the evening when business would end. He had struck up a friendship with Molly Verney, secretary to a Cavalry General whose mission in life was to control railway wagons and see that they were not stranded empty in South Wales when they ought to be full in Warwickshire. Molly was a slender, tall girl with violet eyes and the oval, pale face of a Madonna. She dressed in perpetual mourning "for all the soldiers who've nobody to mourn for their poor souls," she said; but Frobisher half believed she did it because it exploited her fragility. When you danced with her, she was like a lily bending in your arms and swaying into your own figure; she looked up at you with liquid, sorrowful eyes. Frobisher, when he looked down at her, had thoughts of a waveless sea rising and falling beneath a dark moon. With her, he saw such plays as *The Title*, *The Naughty Wife* and *Nothing But The Truth*. When he left her, she would give him a slow kiss.

He had taken a couple of rooms in a semi-detached house at Barnes; and as Molly shared a flat in Earl's Court Road, it was easy to see her home. He had chosen

his rooms because his landlady came from the north. He found it extremely pleasant to encounter the slow speech, full vowels, and racy humour of Lancashire among so much polite insolence.

It was from his landlady, Mrs. Laverack, that Frobisher learnt a good deal of what she herself called "what was what". Mrs. Laverack came from Bury, and when anywhere south of Birmingham, she felt a sojourner in a strange land. "Not", she said, "but what I can hold mi own, but they clem theirselves to put it on their backs, and they're that polite you don't know them as hate you fro' them as love you. Bits o' typists go off in their bits o' rabbit skins as if they were the Princess o' Teck; and if you ring somebody up and they're that haughty they sound as if they kept their voices in the refrigerator, you may be bound you're speakin' to the skivvy who calls herself the lady's maid."

A short, lively piece was Mrs. Laverack, with very clear grey eyes behind pince-nez, which were secured by a thin gold chain and a gold hook behind her ear. If she got on with you, she was frank and unbosomed herself; if she didn't, she answered in such phrases as "Well, I don't know," or "I shall have to see." Her eyes were heavy beneath, and were capable of being slumbrous and of regarding you as though she was wondering what you would be like to be wedded to, or in your cups. Her chin was rather too deep to permit of her being handsome, her skin too pale and her teeth too obviously made in a factory; but she was a good soul, and Frobisher formed a warm regard for her. "I'm like a fish out o' water down here," she would say, "but Ted wanted to come, and when Ted wants a thing bad enough, he has to have it." Ted was a music-hall comedian who had once climbed

into the middle of the bill at the Coliseum; but, for the most part, took his slow, robust humour to Hammersmith, Brixton and Bethnal Green. When she learned that Frobisher knew something of the theatre, she said, "Well, it's all right if you keep off the boards. It's either a lot or it's nowt if you're on 'em. You're either all that's wonderful or you're nothin' a pound at all. And when your husband is a comedian it's worse nor ever." Frobisher asked her why that was. She said, "Well, he gets so used to talkin' tommy-rot and plaguin' everybody, that you never know whether he's plaguin' you, too. He comes home and he sez, 'There's a nice bit o' stuff follows me on at the Hipp. this week—tipped me the wink to-night, and to-morrow I shall take her out for some fish an' chips I shouldn't wonder.' And then he laughs his famous laugh that's made millions smile (that's what he has on his postcards, and how I hate it), and I don't know whether he's lyin' to me or not. If I get ratty, he sez he was kiddin'; and if I take no notice, like as not, he takes the girl out and sez, 'Well, I told you all about it.' An' another thing, Mr. Frobisher, it's not all beer and skittles bein' married to a celebrity. We go to parties and people say, 'Don't you feel proud of him?' And I smile, silly like, and say nothin'. I'm diein' to say, 'Me? Proud of *him*? What for? He can't help bein' funny. You should see him breakin' his heart when he can't get a job or the management put his name in small type, or his head aches, or he comes home an' he hasn't gone down so well—he's not funny then. He's like a girl who's been puttin' her hair in pins half the week to see her boy on Saturday, and when Saturday comes, her boy don't turn up.' Not", she added, looking at the fire and her mouth curling wistfully, "that I've anythin' against Ted. I haven't

. . . only sometimes I want to be in the centre of the picture myself. . . . I want to be the one that matters. It's only happened once . . . when our little girl were born. Oh, you've no idea how important and lovely I felt. . . . I felt as if I was the heroine of a play . . . you know, Trilby or somethin' like that . . . lyin' there, and people bein' fussy. It's hell havin' babies; but you do get a fortnight in bed and people do fetch and carry for you; aye, an' many a poor mother thinks it's worth it."

She usually served him a four-course dinner—perhaps soup, grilled herring, fried bully beef and apple dumpling —that necessitated many visits to his room, and he was glad enough for her to talk while he ate.

It was from Mrs. Laverack too, that he learned something of the seamier side of rationing. "Do you know," she said, "I've waited as long as four hours to get my butter ration—butter what turned out to be marg; and that brass-faced woman next door, Mrs. Johnson, got 8lb. in one day by sendin' four of her childer, one after the other? She's a food hoarder, that one. I recollect her six months ago when they started prosecutin' for it, and one woman down the road who'd hoarded nearly half a ton got fined forty pounds and costs—Mrs. Johnson went as white as if she'd been in her coffin. I used to see her behind her curtains watching me come in from my shoppin', tryin' to count how many parcels I had—her spyin' on me, and her as crooked as a twisted nail. When the Government said those who gave up their hoards wouldn't be prosecuted, *I* know who sent off a big parcel o' stuff addressed to Wandsworth Hospital and pretended she was heartbroken over t' wounded soldiers. Aye, she's a beezum, that one. In January, she went to Smithfield Market and queued up at three o'clock in the morning

for her Sunday joint—she told me there were four thousand of 'em there—'Aye, all mad,' I said to her—but fancy her, and her not t' size o' sixpennyworth o' copper, botherin' about her belly as if she were a buck navvy. 'I'd rather have my frozen stuff, stamped 1908 and seemin'ly dead ten years,' I said, 'than behave that road.' 'My husband is a delicate man,' she said, 'and must be looked after.' 'Let him join up,' I said, 't' King-'ll do all t' lookin' after him, he needs.' "

She usually brought his breakfast, bright as a bird, quick and alert and smiling when she caught his eye; but on this May morning her face was grey, her eyes heavy and she avoided his glance. When he bade her good morning her lips moved but no sound came. She went, after laying the dishes before him, and stood with her arm on the black, marble mantelpiece. After a moment or two he stopped eating and turned round. She was crying quietly, the tears running unheeded down her face and falling on to her pinafore that she had lifted to raise to her cheeks but had raised no higher than her waist. He pulled an armchair to her and put his arm on her shoulder. "Sit down and tell me," he said. "Sometimes it's not so bad if you tell somebody." He was very stirred and, in a way, a little frightened. To see Mrs. Laverack in tears was almost like seeing a man cry; it must have been a sharp rock, he felt, to pierce that sturdy bark. "It was last night," she said. "I went down to Shoreditch—I had a letter from Ted asking me to go and see the wife of one of his platoon who'd been wounded. That wasn't so bad, although this little half-lit shop with its window full of everythin' from bootlaces to sticks o' licorice and one or two stale Eccles cakes, and this half-clemmed woman tryin' to make a livin' out of

it wasn't exactly like seeing Fred Karno's. I'd been left not more than five minutes when the signal rockets went for the air raid."

Frobisher nodded. "I didn't think it was a bad one," he said. "I was in the Pavilion, and the show just went on."

"It wasn't any worse than usual," she said, "but you know how all round Shoreditch there are poor Jews and all sorts of aliens who get that scared they don't know what they're doin'. A lot of 'em are so frightened they've begun to take their beddin' and mattresses down to the Tubes every night, and the kids are cryin' and cold and hungry lyin' about there. An' smell—my! Well, last night, as soon as the signal rockets went, these poor Jews mistook 'em for bombs, and hundreds of 'em made one mad rush—I shall never forget it—fat women with their blouses half undone and aprons trailing round their feet, runnin' and tumblin' and slitherin' towards the Tube entrance. Now and then one or two would fall and half a dozen others would trip up over 'em. A lot of 'em were carrying childer in their arms. One Jewess with a baby fell and the baby cut its head. She had red hair and she got up with the devil in her face and turned on a little man with a beard—he looked like old Fagin out of *Oliver Twist.* She seemed to be sayin' he caused it—I couldn't understand her jabber—and she gave him a swingin' clout on the head which knocked him down. Another woman then struck her, and in the middle of the babies' and women's screams, and the shouts and the cursin' another signal rocket went and they went off pell-mell again, forgettin' their fight. Two policemen came runnin', shoutin' 'Not bombs, rockets—no danger yet,' and I started shoutin', too; but they were past heedin',

they were like folk possessed. Then we saw a baby bein' trampled underfoot, its little face crushed into the pavin' stones. Oh God, I shall never forget it." She began to cry again. After a while she went on. "I nearly fainted, I think, and then I went daft, too. I ran to the back of t' mob and flung myself on a man and we fell backwards into the gutter. 'You damn fools!' I was shoutin', 'Come away! You've killed a child, blast you!' But every time a signal rocket went off, they became worse than ever. I stayed there till all the mob had fought their way into the Tube and down the steps; and when it was over, seven childer were dead. I stood in a daze watchin' the stretchers and ambulances take 'em away; in two or three cases, nobody went with 'em—their parents had lost 'em and were huddled, terrified, downstairs in the Tube. I could have broken my heart—it seemed the last straw—goin' off alone to the mortuary. Then, about the time the raid really began I started to walk. People shouted at me to come into shelter, but I was half dazed and not carin' what I did. Searchlights were sweepin' this way and that, and the usual din and racket goin' on . . . you know what it's like without me tellin' . . . once a lump o' metal dropped about ten yards ahead o' me and split the flags. I remember stoppin' and lookin' at the hole it made, but it had no effect on me. My mind kept goin' back to that mad lot and that baby's face all smashed. I was right past Hyde Park when the buses started runnin' again, but I didn't want to get on one. I didn't feel I could bear bein' near people. It was past twelve when I got back." Frobisher tried to tell her how well she'd behaved; but everything he said sounded lame and feeble. He thought of how, in France, bitter with rage and grief, he had said, when they heard of air raids:

"That's the stuff! that'll wake 'em up—show 'em there's a bloody war on." And now he felt ashamed. He said: "You've been through it—that was as bad if not worse than anything I've been in at." She said: "There's a letter from Ted this morning, but I've not opened it yet; he always tries to be funny and make a joke or two, and after last night, it seems like jokin' at a funeral." She blew her nose, and polished her spectacles and picked up her tray. "I'm a fool", she said, "for upsettin' myself like this, but I feel a lot better for it." A half smile flitted across her face that had grown worn and lined in a night. "I'm glad, if it does you good," he said. "That's what men are for—shock absorbers."

The phrase entered his mind again the next day when he saw Molly at luncheon in the Ministry restaurant. She gave him a telegram she had had from her mother: "War Office have wired Eustace killed in action. Please come home for few days." He gave it back to her and put his hand over hers, lying on the plain wooden table. She ate nothing. Her eyes were burning. They left the restaurant and walked along the corridor. At the turning where they parted, she placed her hand impulsively on his arm and said, looking up, "Take me out to-night, Martin." In some such fashion, men in France had said, "O hell, let's go and get blotto!"

He said: "All right, Molly, of course we'll go out. And—take it easy."

She said: "I shall go off early and change. The chief has already told me to go and rest—and I'll call for you at seven."

"Fine," he said.

He felt charged with excitement throughout the afternoon. She arrived at seven wearing a black velvet cloak.

Beneath was a frock of scarlet, tight across the bosom so that her breasts which were small and delicately shaped, faintly curved the taffeta. She had no hat. He was still writing, though Mr. Bardew had gone; and she came leaning on the desk at his shoulder to see what he was working at. It was a "Shipbuilder's Song", with the clank of rivets in it and a rough, strong metre.

"'Tis a poet he's becoming, surely," she said, laughing at him. He turned his head and met her eyes staring straight into his. He leaned towards her and placed his lips on hers. Her eyes closed. He sighed and rose. "This is strictly against the rules, Molly," he said as nonchalantly as he could. He was wondering why, on this evening, she had donned such colour and whether she was as stirred as he was.

They took a taxi to Cordoni's, a small Italian restaurant in Compton Street, Soho; and drank a bottle of Chianti with their modest dinner, and from there went to the Savoy to see *Nothing But The Truth.* The dress circle was half full of men in khaki accompanied by women, some elaborately painted and excessively feminine; others powdered white, with shortish hair and flat, boyish figures. Three wore monocles.

"What a pity they can't be men," he said.

"They do their best, I'm told," said Molly, "especially by candle light, poor dears. It'll be a thin time some of us will be having when you've finished doing one another in. When I think of the boys I know who've caught the 'last packet', I feel first cousin to Methuselah, and as if only men are mortal. It intoxicates me—makes me want to take risks, too." He glanced at her eyes, like leaping flames. But she was going on more calmly, "Eustace was two years older, but he'll never get any older

now. And I shall go on living—on and on."

"I hope so," he said quietly, and put his hand on her wrist holding it tightly.

"You are a darling," she said. "You're one of the few safe things in khaki that's left. You won't be after deserting us?"

He shook his head and said mockingly: "You look terrible Irish to-night, God save us."

She wore a green silk scarf knotted loosely on her breast. Her dark lustrous hair was parted at the side and coiled on the nape of her slender neck; this depth of colouring and the darkness of her eyes enhanced the pallor of her cheek and throat. She was like a tulip flaming there.

"Why shouldn't I be Irish?" she asked smiling. "You're probably half Irish yourself, with your long nose and dreamy eyes." The show went well, and they laughed with the rest. Once or twice he thought "Eustace dead and here we are. . . ." and then pushed the thought aside. What was the use? The trench spirit was best—laugh, for to-morrow. . . .

"You're awfully beautiful, to-night," he said as they were driving towards Earl's Court Road. She was sitting leaning slightly on him, her legs crossed and her short skirt showing her silk stockings which gleamed faintly in the dimmed lights of passing vehicles.

"Am I?" she asked drowsily, pushing back her head to smile into his eyes. When he took her in his arms he felt half drunk with emotion. They got out at the flat and he paid the driver while she walked up the steps and fitted her key into the lock.

"You'll come in, Martin?" Her voice was cool. "Kitty's away to-night, but I daresay I can find a drink."

"I'd love to," he said, a little hoarsely. He felt slightly dazed and unaccountable. He ought, he knew, to talk as they climbed the dark stairs and went into the tiny room overcrowded with furniture—a small organ, a gramophone, several religious pictures and a bust of the Virgin, evidence of Kitty's devout Catholicism—but he was unable to open his mouth. He took off his British warm and stood with his back to the mantelpiece while Molly moved delicately about mixing a couple of whisky-sodas. She brought him his drink and sipped hers, looking at him over her glass.

"I believe you're a spirit—a new sort of leprechaun," he said.

She didn't reply but went to the bedroom switching on the light. Through a mirror he could see her taking a brush over her hair and running a lipstick over her mouth, rather full and sensuous. She looked sad for a moment and then, perhaps realizing he could see her, broke into a smile.

He found himself moving towards the bedroom door. He paused there and she turned and saw him.

"Molly, darling!" he said. His body was trembling and his lips would hardly frame the words.

"Dearest," she said, moving towards him with hands half outstretched. He held her, murmuring "My love, my love!" She had surrendered herself. He sank, sitting on the bedside, with her in his arms, and almost imperceptibly they moved till their heads were on the pillow.

"Molly, Molly," he was speaking into her bosom, "you have no right to be so beautiful"; and she said, whispering, "Yes, I have—for you." They spoke no more while he kissed her face, her hair, her bosom; and while his hands caressed her and rested lightly on her gently swelling breasts and hips. Then they lay still in deep quiet;

peace and content flowed through his body and limbs. He was thinking: "So this is what I have been wanting so long, to lie and hold a woman in my arms."

After a while, he said: "I don't want to leave you. Dare I ask if I may stay?"

She said: "Of course you must stay, darling." She might have been telling a little boy he might stay home from school. Then she added: "But hadn't we better arrange ourselves, Martin? Your buttons. . . ." She smiled at him ruefully.

He said, remorsefully, "Oh, my dear! What a b.f. I am."

He went off into the next room, softly swearing at himself. When he returned, she was sitting up in bed with the light gleaming on her pale face and arms. His strength turned to water when he beheld her loveliness, and he was trembling again when he took her in his arms beneath the sheets and stretched his long legs over her cool, smooth ones. He felt he could never be tender enough towards her, that his ecstasy could never have been equalled. He was so grave and gentle that when, presently, she broke into a low laugh of delight, he was startled. He thought, "She seems a lot older than me, all at once."

He awoke early. She was still sleeping on his arm and did not stir when he brushed her cheek with his lips. He lay looking at the grey sky. Dawn had broken, but a single star sparkled. He watched it paling and shooting up, it seemed, as a dying candle does. Gradually the sky grew radiant. Greyish-white clouds turned delicate pink, and next to rose. They covered the star, passed, and revealed it again, a pin-point of golden light, sailed over the star again and now it was gone.

He thought, "I'm a funny devil; I might have been doing this for ages."

CHAPTER XI

THE NEXT day, Molly left for Dublin. They parted at the flat. She said, "Good-bye, Martin, dear, you've been very sweet." He thought that was a curious way of putting it, but she seemed in a conventional mood. He suspected she was far less romantic than he was, despite her fragility and violet eyes. Doubtless she knew what she was about. But he couldn't help being disappointed. So he said, "Good-bye, darling," briskly, kissed her in a matter of fact way, and ran down the steps. He rang up Mrs. Laverack and told her a midnight conference at the Ministry had continued so long that he had thought it best to go to an hotel. She said, "I see," without enthusiasm. He suspected she didn't believe him. He told himself that he didn't care a damn whether she believed him or not; but he remained discontented. Women were the devil. He wished he was a better liar.

He began to think about Fleur, and he resented her ability to make him feel a little small. He told himself he was a conventional damn fool; he was ashamed of himself for not being able to carry the whole thing off in his own mind as rather splendid and casual. Because it was not, he told himself, as though he regretted what had happened. Not in the least. He saw it all as perfectly inevitable; in the same circumstances it would occur again.

He imagined himself saying grandiloquently to Fleur: "If you want me, you must take me as I am. No doubt we shall both let one another down. We must have a measure of freedom." He would, if need be, enlarge on the subject of Lesbianism, perversion, free-love and so on. He probably knew more about these affairs than she did. And he heard her saying, "Of course. Why discuss it? One takes all this for granted. It's a devil of a crash that's coming one day to you, Martin." That, or she would walk away in silence, her proud mouth hardened and her contempt expressed in the line of her shoulders. But why was he worrying about her at all? Wasn't he perfectly free? Well, was he? Women took hold of you, enchained you, harnessed you with a thousand threads so light that you never noticed them encircling and involving you, and then, lo! You found you couldn't move without breaking them and causing anguish. This was what Tom Armitage had warned him against. Women possessed you. You could no longer do or think or act as you wished. You were a love slave—or a slave of affection or remorse or too acute sensibility. Good God, supposing a child were born to Molly and they married and began to loathe one another. Imagine it! A child as the result of one adventure. He had sat often enough in the police courts when bastardy summonses were being heard, and seen men whom he had despised or regarded as black-guards defending themselves against the charge. Several shillings a week till the child was fifteen, was the usual order. What a price to pay! Two hundred pounds, maybe, for a few moments' madness beneath a canal bridge or on a park bench or down some dark ginnel. The thing was unjust—even to the man, and for the girl it was horror upon horror. The fear, the growing cer-

tainty of disgrace, the prying eyes, the morning sickness, the nausea and loss of looks, the shadows beneath the eyes, the gloating, devilish inquiries, "Aren't you well, dearie?" the frenzied attempts with poisonous pills to rid her womb of the child, the distortion of her shapely body into ugliness, the attempt to hide it in loose skirts and jackets; and then, finally, the hideous agony of bearing the child, perhaps in secret and alone, and anyway, without joy, rapture or pride. And, last of all, the fight in court to force an unwilling, lying father to help keep it alive. Cursed from the beginning to the end—a nameless child and an end to youth and gaiety.

Mr. Bardew was awaiting him with three ideas for articles. He had a busy day and forgot all about Molly and Fleur. He laughed and joked over tea as though never a care had crossed his mind.

When he considered himself, he was worried by his callousness. He seldom thought of the men he had been fond of and who had been killed in France; he didn't think of Fleur half enough; and last night's affair with Molly would, ere long, lose its sharp definition and become blurred in the memory. What was the matter with him? Had his hammering in France numbed him? He used to imagine the very reverse had happened, that he was as a frayed fiddle-string that twanged and jangled too readily. He seemed to be a most appalling mixture—of being too easily moved by cheap sentiment—not long before, he had found a lump in his throat at a sloppy film—and of too swiftly forgetting the things that mattered. The war had coarsened him and blunted him and cheapened him. That was it. "Altogether," he thought, "I seem to be very little a pound, as they say in Saddlebridge."

Next day he got a letter from Fleur. She wrote: "Dear Martin," as if no longer sure of their footing ("That's my fault, too," he thought. "She doesn't know where she is with me"). She said, "I couldn't get you out of my mind yesterday. I shouldn't have been surprised if you had risen out of the pavement. Don't laugh. I feel a little psychic . . . if that's the word? A fortnight ago, Micky O'Rourke—you remember, the big red-haired man who played full-back for Burnham Rangers—I used to think I had a 'crush on him' when I was about sixteen—came to see me. He was off back to France. He gave me an amulet—I daresay you've seen them—in a little leather case. You pull a tiny chain and a Sacred Heart comes out. He'd had it all the time—had touching faith in it. Well, he gave it to me and said: 'I want you to have this, Fleur. No good to me any more.' I told him not to be silly. He said he wasn't—but it had saved him for two years and he knew it wasn't any good. He'd be finished in a fortnight. No, he wasn't melancholy—he never was, you know—always full of life and go and stories and swearing in a nice sort of way. Well, he was just the same —quite chirpy really, said he wasn't a bit worried, he'd dodged more than most and he couldn't expect to go on for ever. He'd got a commission in the Dublin Fusiliers. He shook hands—didn't even kiss me—and went off whistling. In a fortnight to the day he was shot clean through the head. I wasn't surprised, somehow. I pretended I didn't believe him at the time, but he made me feel he knew. Does that shake your scepticism? Things aren't too happy at home now." She signed herself "Yours always". He wondered what was wrong at home. Somehow, he felt that was the real reason why she had written. The O'Rourke incident was extraordinary, but he felt

she hadn't broken a rather long silence because of it. A few days later, she wrote again: "I must talk to you Martin dear, and there's nobody else I can trust. It's about father. You know how easily he falls for pretty women—or perhaps you don't. There's a new actress at the Little, a Charlotte Broughton, terribly blonde, with large blue eyes, thirtyish, plump with curves she's preserved despite the rationing. She's the real stage girl—might have walked out of a play—calls everybody 'Darling', swears pretty freely, been in musical comedy since she was sixteen and now has come to straight stuff because her voice is going. (Too much gin, I should think.) I met her round the back and asked her to tea, as she was new and didn't know many people. She came along, rather made up and finger-nails rouged a bit, and I must grant she looked very attractive in a flashy sort of way. As a matter of fact, she's very amusing—so long as what she says has no bearing on you. Very outspoken on sex—sex appetites are like hunger—have to be satisfied, and so on. Not put quite so crudely as that, perhaps; but you don't misunderstand her. Am I shocking you? I've seen and heard a lot in the V.A.D. hospital: and theatre dressing rooms are pretty frank, as you know. I imagine father found her a change from mother, because mother, although she says she's terribly broadminded, has a strong streak of puritanism in her. Can you see her, smiling coldly, and serving tea while the blonde woman sank back on the couch displaying her legs and smoking a Turkish cigarette? I must own, in justice to father, that she dropped her eyes at him pretty badly and . . . Oh, Martin, dear, I can't go on in this heartless, devilish way any more. I'm dreadfully upset. Father's been to the Little frequently and takes this woman off in his car to the

Adelphi Hotel. I hear of him dancing with her, and being very gay. Mummy sits at home with her mouth growing more compressed and making excuses for him. He must get material for his work, she says, and anyway, she supposes she herself really *is* very dull and he likes to see life . . . and Martin, I wish you were here. I could break my heart over it. Why is life so beastly? We try to be terribly bright and a little brutal and awfully sophisticated, and so soon as the thing touches us, we're soft or primitive and extremely young. Please, Martin, if you ever marry, don't let her down, will you? I couldn't bear losing my respect for you. Write to me. My love. Fleur."

He read the letter in bed, and got up feeling extraordinarily gay. He sang bits of "I know of two bright eyes, waiting for me-e," and got the shaving soap in his mouth. He was thinking, "The only one she can trust—fine!" What was the good of pretending he was not in love with her? She didn't always make him feel sensuous so that his knees turned to liquid: for the most part she was too holy for that, but after all, he thought, "It must be the devil to marry a woman for whom your passion is so consuming that all your work and your games and your body and mind go to hell: because, if you're not careful, I suppose that's where they *do* go." No, Fleur wouldn't be like that. She would be magnificent, proud, cold sometimes, astringent, keep him up to scratch. He saw her in blue velvet, moving in the twilight of a large music room with somebody—short-sighted "Little Eric" say, who wrote comedian's songs and wore his hair without parting, sported stiff collars and small ready-made bows, but had fingers with genius in them—yes, "Little Eric" would come and play Schumann and Wolff and she would stand with the firelight making a pool of flame about her

knees, singing with her chin tilted up a little and her eyes now and again catching his in the dimness and laughing at him with delight. And he would banter her and say, "A good song, darling; if only I could tell what on earth you say." And she would come to him and make a furious onslaught as he sat on the couch and roll him over and pummel him, as if they were children. And "Little Eric" would affect a Lancashire accent and say: "Now yo' two, yo' might be wed to one another, t'way yo' carry on."

He went down to breakfast with dancing eyes so that Mrs. Laverack said, "What's the matter this mornin'? 'Ave they made you an admiral, Mr. Frobisher? There's never any mistakin' when you're pleased. You're like a dog wi' two tails this mornin'." He looked at her, elevating his eyebrows—rather black and thick—so that he looked like George Robey, and said, "Well, you're rather topsides with *your* self, if I'm not mistaken. Has Ted sent his green envelope?" "Yea," she said, "he has that. He starts: 'Dear wife, this is awful. Send me a pound. He sez he's that thin he can't tell which is his shadow and which is hisself, an' he has to listen and see which one the noise comes from when he speaks, to know which one to give the 'van rouge' to. He sez two Lancashire men in his platoon were bosom pals and then they fell out. They didn't speak for weeks, and then one got a piece o' shell in his back and went off to the dressin' station. His pal went to see him. 'I'm sorry to see tha's copped out, Fred,' he said. 'An' I shouldn't like thee to peg out wi'out us makin' it up.'

" 'All right, Joe,' sez Fred. 'I feel pretty tidy, like, now.'

" 'Aye, well,' sez Joe, 'I shouldn't count too much on gettin' better becos there's a lot o' poisonous matter in

some o' these German whizz-bangs. But I'm glad to ha' seen thee. So good neet.' An' off Joe goes. Presently he comes back and walks up to Fred who were just dozin' off and he sez, 'Fred!'

" 'Aye, Joe.'

" 'Tha understan's,' sez Joe, 'that if tha does get better, all this goes for nowt; an' our row's still on, and when tha' comes back to t' battalion, we'st 'ave it out proper.' "

Riding down to Charing Cross on the District Railway, he wondered, notwithstanding his love for Fleur, whether he would ever be proof against Molly Verney, if she "hung her hat up at him" again. He would have liked to think so; but he had grave doubts. His thoughts flew off to Tom Armitage. When he had read Fleur's letter he had felt contempt for her father. Was he, Frobisher, any better? He had heard cynical women say, "No man is safe with a pretty woman," and a year or two ago, had been disdainful and unbelieving. This was one of the tragedies of life, then, that as men grew older their desires grew more powerful, their ideals faded, they pandered to themselves and became weak, irresolute, more sensual, more animal. Not all men, of course, but a good many. And women? A woman novelist dancing with him had said, when he asked her what women were interested in, "Sex; nothing else." Women devoured the sex novels, went in hordes to the risqué plays, flaunted themselves more and more as men were reduced in numbers. By God, it was pitiful and beastly, this struggle to win the favour of a male.

He called in a post office and sent a wire, "Buck up. Writing. Best Love." And later in the day sent a letter. "Fleur darling" (he wrote) "I am an idiot for not having written long ago. I'm terribly sorry about this blonde

woman; and yet, doesn't the fact that he's open about it make it less awful? Isn't he probably studying her, as surgeons study an interesting case? She'll figure in his next novel, I daresay. In any case, it won't last. He's far too finely drawn, too sensitive, too fastidious, to bother with her for long. She'll do something to sicken him and he'll take fright, shy off like a maid from a brutal lover. Try not to think any worse of him. I don't believe I think any worse myself now the first shock is over. I should dread your knowing all I do or all I think. I'm not any worse than other folk, I imagine, but we're all capable of achieving the heights and then dropping like a stone. Which of us is there could stand his fellows seeing him as God sees him? Half the men in public life seem to have mistresses; but so long as they don't flaunt the fact in public, the public doesn't care. In fact, the public conceives affection for those who can well afford to laugh at rules, and do laugh at 'em. Most people think the more of Elizabeth for having taken Essex as her lover (even if she didn't, they like to think she did); what of Bluff King Hal who got rid of his wives like cast-off jackets when they didn't produce the heir? What of Sweet Nell of Old Drury, of Napoleon, of Nelson and Lady Hamilton? Can you, in fact, expect a man who is half a genius—as your father is—to behave like a Methodist parson; and not all the Methodist parsons are fit subjects to write home about. You've only got to pass on down the years, and what was a scandal, causing pain in the man's lifetime, is counted to him for—not virtue, perhaps—but devilry and spirit a little later. If your father begot a child by this blonde actress and the child turned out to be an Ellen Terry or a Charles Dickens (and by heaven it's as likely as not; for, out of those illicit, passionate unions, spring the geniuses

often enough), the generations to come would smile on it and count it a credit to the pair of 'em. So let's try and have a sense of humour, darling. You and I laugh with the scoundrels on the stage—especially if they're handsome devils who have style and a breath of the divine spark in them—and see what they do as perfectly natural. We say, 'After all, he had a devilish dull time, and she threw herself at him; and she's damned attractive, too'; but so soon as irregularity enters our own little pettifogging life, we rise up like the Puritans of Cromwell's days and act as if our minds and sympathy were the size of threepenny-bits. Don't imagine I'm any better at this Catholic understanding than you are, dear. My first reaction to your father's affair was precisely your own. And if Susan or Ben ran off the rails, I'd be horrified; horrified at first, anyway. I should try and get over it as I'm trying to get you over the stile now. And if I climbed over, I should know I'd done the right thing. When I get frightfully depressed, I look at the stars and consider that they are as the sands of the seashore in number, that each one is far larger than the earth; and then I laugh at myself for being conceited enough to think that anything affecting me matters a tuppenny damn. It isn't a sound philosophy I know, because so long as what we do makes others happy or unhappy, it matters enormously; but still, it serves me for the moment. Harrop used to say: 'It'll be all the same a hundred years from now,' and his second motto was, 'You can always get out of it by paying'; though whether the paying was in money or suffering, he wasn't sure. Probably in three months, darling, you'll have forgotten all about it, and everything will be normal and comfortable again; and you'll be looking back, and saying 'What a damned fool I was for

worrying so and desthroying meself over it, as the Irish say.' So, cheer up, darling. I'm glad and proud you wrote. I sang in the bath like billyho when I read I was the only one you can trust. My Sam Browne had to be let out another hole. So be careful what you say to me or I shall be so 'up stage' I shan't know you. My love. Always, always, Martin."

CHAPTER XII

He lived through the succeeding weeks in daily expectation of drama. The postman's morning visit might any day be that of one bringing a challenge to new adventure; every morning as he walked the remaining yards down the rather dim corridor to his room he thought, "I wonder what's on my table this morning?" His imagination conjured up startling events . . . that Molly was with child and would wire him to that effect —"Excommunicated by priest . . . mother next January" . . . something like that. He was vague about the penalties of the Roman Church but he thought excommunication sounded romantic. He would wire back, "Flying over to-morrow. Married next Saturday." But no letter from Molly came. Molly, of course, was no more with child than he was; at that moment she was having a tempestuous affair with a Dublin hospital doctor who had held her so tightly at the Nurses' Ball and had such strong surgeon's hands and such fine white teeth and piercing black eyes (he came from Connaught where his grandmother had sown potatoes in her bare feet and the morals of the potato fields were not yet eradicated from his bones) that she could do no less than yield to his importunity. "Afther all," as he said, "I've volunteered for the fightin' line wi' the Dublin Fusiliers and only the Blessed Virgin herself knows whether I'll be comin' back." Molly hadn't for-

gotten Martin; she thought of him as her young poet friend whose love-making was grave and gentle and to whom women were a little holy and extremely breakable. "Rather like goin' to bed with you, darlin'," she said to her friend Sheila Cormack. Molly would meet him again. But for the moment her mother wished her to stay in Ireland and Dr. Rafferty declared he couldn't live between one operation and the next without her. And for the most part, he didn't.

Another of Martin's visions was of arriving in the office to find Fleur waiting for him. She would have run away from home . . . couldn't stand the blonde woman scandal any more. . . . "Mother suffering more through my seeing it all. . . . I've told father what I think of him and here I am. I want a job." And he would say: "You know I'm terribly in love with you Fleur, don't you? Let's get married." And, her eyes brimming with tenderness, she. . . . Um. But, of course, nothing of the sort happened. He opened his door, heaved a sigh, glanced through the letters and documents awaiting him, dismissed that imagination of his which gave him almost as many thrills as life itself, and settled down to his job. It wasn't difficult, as a rule to bring out the vein of "Manchester School" hardness and practical common sense and grim humour that ran like a vein of iron in his make-up. Tom Armitage, had Martin known, had decided he must be getting old; for late nights with Charlotte Broughton made him so nervy and exhausted the next day that decent work was out of the question. And as he was artist enough to put work before anything else, he gave Charlotte up. Or was it Charlotte who gave him up? Charlotte was an artist too and after the excitement and flattery of being desired by an author whose name she heard mentioned in the same

rank as Houghton and Bennett, had worn off, she found his standard rather boring. His talk of Ibsen, Chekhov, Molière, and Strindberg wearied her. Her mind had divided Continental drama into two categories—melancholy madness and risqué farce. Making a half-hearted attempt to hide a yawn, she would declare: "If you're *going* to be foreign, darling, I always say you can't beat a good Viennese bedroom farce, though why we should go out of dear old London, I don't know. Put an East Ender in Park Lane, and a Mayfair son of a titled woman beachcombing in the Pacific and you've got all the plot anybody can want; though why the beachcomber can't be a lovely woman gone a bit wrong for a change I don't know either. You write a play with me gone to the bad on a Hawaiian Island where a crew are shipwrecked, and I guarantee you'd have a play strong enough for the Lyceum itself."

He said: "Why go all the way to Hawaii, Charlotte?"

She didn't like the remark. He had a trick of saying things with a funny look in his eyes, and you didn't know whether he was being nasty, or quizzical, or just trying to amuse you. But there's no pleasure in talking to a person when you suspect he's "kidding you", as she said to old Charley one night when they waited in the wings, trying with books in their hands to stimulate memories unequal to the task of a fresh play every other week or so.

"And once", she said, "you don't know whether people are coming or going, you're better without 'em."

All Martin heard was that Tom Armitage had begun to write as if a great work was to be done and he might die before it was finished. (That, in fact, was a state of mind that often possessed him. Every new book, while he worked at it, was finer than anything that had gone be-

fore. Once it was finished, he forgot it. But while it grew in his hands, he was worried by an excitable heart and a realization of the hazards of even normal life. Every ride in the car, every railway journey had death, as it were, on board. So he thought.)

So the few remaining months before the Armistice were bereft of startling events to Frobisher. England drew slowly away from the terror and uncertainty of the March break-through; by July Churchill pronounced all was well. After being again rejected by the Medical Board, Frobisher took no very keen interest in the passage of events. In France so long ago as July 1916 he had seen the war as a sort of life that would go on eternally; and now when the end approached, he didn't realize it. He had been in the vortex and it had cast him up on one side, bruised, strained, rather worn out and numbed. He sat there watching the vortex swirl on, feeling it was a devilish business, but one that he had taken his share in, and that now no more greatly concerned him. His conscience was easy. He read of troops driving the Germans back, breaking the Hindenburg line of concrete and steel, capturing impregnable positions with incredible dash and gallantry, swimming canals apparently with bayonets and rifles in their teeth, achieving deeds in mass akin to those that won Freyburg his V.C.—and he was sceptical. He simply didn't believe it. "Damn it all," he said to himself, "the chaps *I* was with couldn't have fetched off these exploits and, by God, they were a hell of a lot superior to those who've gone out since." He had been sickened by newspaper stories of men who went over the top playing football; these new tales were of the same genre, he concluded.

The actual end of the war was as big a surprise

to him as to many of those on the fields of France.

He was writing at his desk when the maroons went at eleven o'clock on November 11th, 1918. Mr. Bardew lifted his face above his stooping shoulders, and looking at Frobisher over his steel pince-nez, said, in his high silky voice: "Well, Frobisher, that's the end." He gravely rose and walked round to Frobisher and held out his hand. Frobisher said: "By God, yes." Waves of cheers, now shrill, now deeper, *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, were rising outside. Feet scuttered down the corridor. The door opened and Mrs. Cross, their woman clerk, burst in with flushed face. She was a thin woman, pale and inclined to anæmia. She stopped, fluttering her hands. Mr. Bardew looked at her and, slightly disapproving, said: "Yes, Mrs. Cross?"

"It's peace, Mr. Bardew," she said. She was tremulous, and now seemed a little frightened at her temerity, but a little scornful too at the men's lack of spirit. Frobisher was thinking, "I suppose I ought to be jumping on the desk, dancing a Highland Reel with old Bardew."

Mrs. Cross said: "Miss Venables has fainted, sir. Her young man . . . in the artillery. Can she go home?"

Mr. Bardew was clearly of opinion that Miss Venables was a damned nuisance, fainting because the war was over. But he said: "Yes, send her home." Frobisher was astonished at his own lack of enthusiasm. There was a good deal of work to be done. A lot of letters had to be written, articles to be passed for publication. He thought, "Damn it, the world hasn't stopped because the war's stopped." He tried to write again, but it was useless. Mrs. Cross came in once more. "Mr. Westerton says we can all go home."

"The devil he does," said Frobisher.

"Yes," said Mrs. Cross; "he was leaving the Ministry in his motor car and all the girls were hanging out of the hotel windows waving handkerchiefs and cheering. And he got up in his car, standing on the seat, and waved some papers in one hand and his silk hat in the other and shouted, 'You can all go home!' "

She pursed her thin lips, and stood waiting. She had delivered an ultimatum and she knew it. Mr. Bardew looked at Frobisher and Frobisher looked at Mr. Bardew. They knew they were beaten. They knew all the world was against them; they knew they were behaving as dried-up, soured old men; they knew that they, who had lost men very dear to them, ought, by common accord, to be going mad with joy, shouting in their delirium. And they couldn't do it. And they were sorry for themselves. Westerton would make speeches to the crowd from the top of his car in Trafalgar Square (as he did); Lloyd George would be besieged in Whitehall and hailed as the saviour of England (as he was); but he, Frobisher, felt solemn and quiet within him. He was getting old—he was seven and twenty; the war had lasted too long. Or was it that *his* Armistice had come long before when the doctors turned him down?

He got up and picked up his hat and cane and gloves. "I think I'll take a walk," he said.

"Don't bother coming back to-day," said Mr. Bardew, his grey eyes softened and kindly.

"I'll look in later in case you want me," said Frobisher.

Office doors were open as he walked down the corridors. Work had stopped instantly in many rooms; windows were pushed up, drawers open, documents in disarray. It reminded him of deserted houses in France left with meals half finished, when the shells dropped too

close or smashed into the framework. There, the coming of war had put its stilling finger on life; here, the coming of peace had stopped the wheels.

He walked down the Hotel Merrilleon steps in the middle of three or four girl secretaries, one of whom pulled his British warm behind and another of whom tilted his cap on one side. One was a friend of Molly Verney's. She said: "My God, how Molly would have loved this," squeezed his arm, and ran gaily after her friends. He turned up Northumberland Avenue towards Trafalgar Square. Outside the Grand Hotel four Anzacs were dancing clumsily a Ring o' Roses round two girls who had clutched each other and were convulsed with laughter. He glanced back from the corner of the Strand; the girls were being kissed and passed from Anzac to Anzac.

The Strand was alive. Flags had burst from buildings as if a miraculous spring had gone that way; taxis were bowling along littered with people—young officers in khaki on top, some of them already tipsy and solemnly blowing hooters; others shouting unintelligibly and waving their arms; others hanging on to doors and running-boards; inside the cabs were more officers with their lady-loves. Groups were dancing on the pavements, lorries drove by packed with soldiers, Waacs, land-girls, and jubilant business men; hats were being waved, handkerchiefs fluttered, bells rung. Strangers stopped him and said: "It's peace," as though they had made a new discovery. A grey-haired man in a silk hat said: "Sir, shake hands. My boy is safe." Frobisher shook hands. "I've lost two, you know," said the man, his eyes suddenly filling with tears.

People were stood on roofs as if the King were driving by. As Frobisher passed the Hotel Cecil—the Royal Air

Force headquarters—a shower of papers fluttered, like a stage snow-storm, from the windows; and a gang of messenger-girls in khaki overalls shrieking with laughter ran outside. A bus swayed by bearing a howling mob; a pretty girl hung over the side with a large sheet of cardboard on which was scrawled, "Charing Cross to Berlin!"

Noise seemed to increase. People were yelling, shouting, laughing as if they had been dumb and suddenly given speech again. Horns blew, squeakers, whistles, cat-calls, cheers were mixed with songs such as "When I get my civvy suit on" and "When the boys come home" and spasms and spurts of shrill or hysterical laughter mingled and rose and fell. And there were odd moments when almost quiet came, akin to odd moments of silence in the racket of war in France.

He turned and retraced his steps towards the Ministry. He wished he could have let himself go, gone mad; he would have liked to be one with the rollicking, tipsily insolent subalterns on taxicab tops. London was a gigantic Shrove Tuesday rag—and he was as a business man, querulous and indignant because trade was interfered with. But no, that wasn't true either. Let him be just to himself. This was the end to countless men's agony and fear; to women who dwelt in terror of telegram boys and postmen this was peace beyond, yes, beyond understanding. He thought: "I'd like to be on a high hill, a long way off, alone with rocks that don't change and near clouds that have gone on sailing by just the same through these mad years." He suddenly wondered whether the dead knew about peace. They must, surely, if they lived. He had had strange ideas sometimes of the dead hovering over the battlefields, loath to leave till the fighting was

done. Well, now their spirits might go winging aloft. The task was over.

On the Ministry steps sat a bandy-legged private of the Middlesex, in full pack. He pushed himself up with his rifle and said: " 'Scuse me, sir, s'like this. I'm doo to go back from leaf—cut me teeth on the blinkin' barb wire, if y'understan' me—an' now war's over; an' I'm doo go back. Do I ought to go, sir, or do I oughter stay. Ole sweat, if you unnerstan' and cut me teeth on barb wire, an' wanter do right thing."

"Report to the depot, I should say," said Frobisher.

The little man pushed his cap back and undid the hooks of his tunic collar. "Can't stan' that bloody place, sir," he said. "Nobody there cut his teeth on barb wire, 'scuse me. France an' san fairy ann," and he lurched off towards the Embankment. After a step or two he paused and grinned back. "Missis'll be bloody glad, too," he said, but whether because he was off back or because the war was over Frobisher couldn't be sure.

He went out to Barnes and spent the night reading. He didn't see the Boy Scouts marching round Piccadilly blowing the All Clear; or pipers parading up Kingsway, or Big Ben illuminated and playing a Victory chime, or M.P.'s trooping across to a special thanksgiving service at Westminster Abbey, or soldiers beating tattoos on their tin hats,or girls dancing like dervishes and kissing strangers in the streets, or hear prostitutes promising Oriental or Victory sensations.

He couldn't forget little Harrop trampled in the mud.

PART II

CHAPTER XIII

IF FROBISHER had been fast in the army's toils, chained to a battalion in France whose discipline rotted once the Armistice bugles were blown and where the men (as happened in some instances) said: "To hell with shifting from these billets—they're the best cribs we've had for a bit," he couldn't have been more eager to leave his job.

Mr. Bardew was now to have the C.B.E., and was going to the Admiralty. Frobisher, it was hinted, might receive some small decoration too. "Why?" he asked, "I'm not a damned typist. They give that to girls," when the M.B.E. was spoken of. Besides, he wanted none of it. "If I couldn't win one in France, I'm damned if I want one for scribbling," he said. In the same way he had repulsed suggestions that he should be promoted in his rank. Fleet Street men had been strutting about as commanders and colonels, dishing out information and conducting press tours. "I should look a prize idiot, shouldn't I, if they made me a lieut.-commander for writing tripe and then, by some mischance, I was re-turned to the regiment and they had to make me second in command, over the heads of men ten times better soldiers than me." So he had stuck sub.-lieut. and found some small pride in writing the title after his name.

It was suggested to him that he might take over Mr. Bardew's appointment and remain on at the Ministry. He went to see Sir Kenneth Kitchen, an old gentleman very dried-up and withered with mutton-chop whiskers and a frock coat who wrote with a quill and had the finest ability in London, Frobisher thought, for saying exactly with his pen what he wanted to say—no more, no less.

The quill waved him to a seat. Frobisher was enjoying it. He didn't want the job and felt very cocky. "Will you make me a permanent Civil Servant?" he asked.

Sir Kenneth hummed. That would have to be gone into. Perhaps Frobisher would become a Cabinet Minister's private secretary when the Ministry was wound up. Sir Kenneth seemed to think that was a desirable goal.

Frobisher said: "My job is with my paper. Six months here now the war's over would be sheer waste. Besides, I'm a little tired of liaison between newspapers and officials who fight against telling them anything. And I'm afraid being somebody's secretary—acting as buffer—devilling for somebody else, isn't in my line."

Sir Kenneth pursed his thin lips and looked sideways, making a small circle in the air with his quill. "You won't mind staying a month or so till we get somebody? Have you thought of going to the Admiralty with Mr. Bardew?"

"He was good enough to mention it. I would rather not. I prefer journalism."

Sir Kenneth rubbed his nose. "Very well," he said. He seemed to think it very remarkable that anybody should prefer journalism to Whitehall. Even journalists thought Frobisher's determination queer. The manager of the *Burnham Gazette* wrote: "Don't be in a hurry. We

shall be glad to have you, of course, but why not keep a quiet job for a month or two?" Frobisher thought: "They all think I'm on the point of death." Another fact that surprised everybody was that he was prepared to return to Lancashire. As if Lancashire were at the back o' beyond. It irritated him. London thought all men from the north wore big, light-coloured cloth caps and said "By gum!" and "Laad" and talked about their "groob!" and sang "On Ilkla' moor baht 'at" and did nothing but wear clogs, race pigeons, kick men to death and go on strike. He rose in his wrath. "There's more life and character and humour in one Lancashire village," he said, "than in all your anæmic, obscene, snobbish, white-livered, mongrel-bred, flat-voiced, ill-fed, underclothed, over-disciplined millions."

"By gum!" they said. "Hark at t' laad!"

Frobisher slipped back into peace. Life had a new flavour. For a time every reporter he met on a newspaper engagement exchanged gossip or experiences. They were all a little lofty in their attitude to those who had "dodged the column"; they were usually not bitter; rather they were pitying and inclined to be generous in saying: "Oh well, I daresay he was unfit," or "He wasn't such a b.f. as we were." But they didn't mean that in their hearts, either. Among them existed a comradeship, often a deep regard.

For a day or two Frobisher wore his British warm over a lounge suit but it drew attention and he dyed it. He hated being stared at; the north could be rude, he found. When he went to see trade union officials and they didn't ask him to sit down he told himself it was of no moment. But he disliked it. Surely he hadn't been wrong in placing

the north so far above the south? He hoped not but wasn't sure. He felt rather proud when occasionally a tram conductor would say: "Glad to see yore back all right. I was in yore mob, sir." At the *Gazette* they formed an ex-service men's association and held a hot-pot supper. The affair was intensely patriotic and democratic—lots of beer and army songs. Two or three of those who had been officers made speeches—a good deal of talk about old comrades, and standing together. Some of the machine hands and parcel-wrappers got rowdy and drunk and Frobisher regretfully admitted to himself that a drunken ex-service man could be as big a damned nuisance as anybody else. A sad ending to a dinner which began with a silence in memory of their dead friends and his reciting of Binyon's, "They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old." They sent a wire to the paper's proprietor assuring him of their regard. When he wired back hoping they had enjoyed their dinner one group muttered: "We paid for the blasted dinner, didn't we, not him. What's he want to talk about the dinner for?" Frobisher concluded that the British working-man is the touchiest creature in the world.

He talked with Grundy about the British Legion. Grundy, a reporter he liked, had won the Military Medal and become a quartermaster sergeant. "No," said Grundy, "I couldn't stand parading with medals on my jacket, and marching in fours and being bossed about. Just as I wouldn't dream of joining the Terriers. It's bad enough when there's a war on. Now . . . shucks." That was Frobisher's view, too. But when things got hot at night, with two or three telephones going, runners downstairs with reports (usually unfounded) of murders in the slums, and they were both tied up writing for dear life, Grundy would pause to say—especially if the editor

dashed in for a page or two of copy: "Hi! Frobisher, what about the Menin road on a night like this. I remember one night when the mules got a whizz-bang among 'em and blood and muck was all over the place. . . ." Grundy would lean back and chew his pencil and ruminate while the editor pushed his hands down the front of his trousers and walked about half frantic with impatience. This was Grundy's way of putting things in their proper place, as he called it. "Jesus, what the hell does it matter whether this fire gets in the Pernambuco edition or not? The old man ought to be up to his backside in mud listening to B.H.Q. on a line that's frayed by water, and minnies ringing the bell every jiffy—then he'd know what life means. Hi! Frobisher, I wonder what the old sods 'ud do if a five-point-nine hit the blasted case-room ten minutes before edition time and laid half the chaps out?" One of Grundy's delights was to imagine the most horrible war catastrophes occurring in the middle of their work. "What price sending one reporter out after another on a story—like we used to do on patrol—and not a perishing one coming back?" Or, "What if the ration of newsprint got done in by a shell on the way from the station one morning?" Or, "What if we were suddenly told to produce the old rag in Newcastle to-morrow night? Cripes, they think they know what work is. Do they hell! Not till the whole blamed staff gets wiped out three times a week will they know they're living." When Murphy, the burly sub-editor who had stayed at home with a weak heart, came to ask for copy, Grundy would occasionally inquire: "Well, how's the old heart, Pat? Been chewing cordite lately?" And to others he would remark jocularly: "You fellows'll be in the front rank in the next blinking war. We're exempted from the next couple—European ones, anyway."

Men showed little sign outwardly of the marks of war. But one afternoon when Frobisher and Spencer of the *Courier* sat down in a tea-room to write a by-election story, Spencer started three times and three times tore his first paragraph up. With drawn face and frightened eyes he turned to Frobisher. "For Christ's sake," he said, "write me a first paragraph. I simply can't begin." Frobisher knew him as an accomplished writer, whose lean, humorous prose needed no initials to stamp it. "It won't be a patch on your own," he said lamely, "but let's see." He scribbled ten straightforward lines, and then Spencer carried on. Frobisher was thinking, "So all the wounds aren't outside." Spencer had done four years as a private in the East Surreys, mostly Ypres way, steadily refusing to take a commission. The only story he would tell concerned a billycan of sherry pushed into his hand from behind a cubbyhole curtain—sherry stolen from the officers' rations. Spencer drank it standing knee deep in viscid mud, staggered to a funk hole and slept for sixteen hours. "I ought to have got it in the neck but the ser'n't major was a sport and told my platoon officer he'd sent me down with diarrhoea," he said.

Frobisher went about like a small volcano that for weeks was quiescent and then, without warning, erupted. He saw photographs hung up of Saunders who had been killed playing football just behind the line (the irony of that sickened him; Saunders had done two years out there when it happened. Done two years—you spoke as if it were time in prison you had done; in a way, it was); of Jameson-James the blue-eyed giant with a gaze so piercing you'd have sworn death wouldn't conquer *him*—yet a bullet had blinded him in Salonika before he had been a fortnight at the game—proving the man who said

you could tell from men's eyes whether they were "for it" was a b.f. But Saunders and Jameson-James had been dead a long time. Their pictures moved him little. What stirred him was the British Legion's appeal for starving men. He stuck up a subscription sheet and went about saying: "What right have we to wages when these poor devils are without?" He said to Susan: "If an ex-service man asked me what right I have to live in a house when he can't, I should have to admit, none whatever. To see these large rooms housing four of us all told when we'd have billeted 250 men here with ease makes me think we're all mad. To have women spending their lives looking after two or three people when one man could cook for fifty—utter waste! Give us holes in the garden, and some bread and cheese and water and an inch or two of meat once a day—that's all we want. And talk about fear! In about five minutes men'll be a hell of a lot more scared of getting the sack than they were of going over the top."

But the fervour didn't last. He might have given ten times what he did to the Legion without severely stinting himself; and he didn't live in his garden hole, nor invite down-and-outs to share his bedroom. He was disgusted with himself. He thought: "I've vision enough to see what to do—and I haven't the guts to do it. It'll always be the same. I shall always see the line for the strong man to take—and I shall always be too weak to take it. I shall meander on, blowing hot and cold, by turns ruthless and sentimental, generous and niggardly, libertine and puritan, Trappist monk and man-about-town; not enough artist to let the world go hang and too much not to be bored stiff with ordinary life and folk. An absolute dud, wash-out, half and half-er."

He spoke something of this to Ben. Ben said: "I've come home myself afore to-day and said to myself, 'You're not many pence to the shilling, Ben, my lad. You wouldn't enjoy seeing stated in cross-examination all you've done to-day.' He's a tidy chap as can satisfy himself. Do that, and there's not much left to do."

Frobisher said: "You know I'm drawing a 25 per cent disability pension. I've no damned right to draw it. I'm earning my usual wage. McIllery's refused one, although he can't use his left arm, because he says he can write with his right arm." Ben said: "D'you think Haig and Jellicoe'll refuse their pensions? What about t' times you worked for a bob a day? But please yourself. I'm all for the McIllery's o' this world. They're nobbut a handful. Let's hope he won't need the brass later on."

"Another thing," said Frobisher. "What am I doing about preventing another war? If I had any guts I should be stumping the country, wakening people up, being an evangelist. Shall I do it? Shall I hell. I haven't the faith, or the energy or the willingness to live poorly. I'm torn by doubts and entangled by ideas. Going to France was a bloody fool's game yet it was the decent chaps, the fellows I like, who went. The 'conchies', the stop-at-homes—for the best reasons in the world, mind you—they give me the jim-jams. I'm with 'em in theory but in practice, in the flesh—not on your life. If there was another war to-morrow and all the good chaps waltzed into it singing 'Three cheers for the red, white and blue' I'll be damned if I don't think I should be off with 'em. You see what a hopeless devil I am. Doing things and cursing myself for an idiot all the time—that's me."

Ben said: "It was a painful job wasn't it Martin, turning soldier, and it's natural it should be a ticklish job

turning back into a civilian. It's a bit like coming into t' world and going out again—both nasty jobs. The Almighty should have managed it a bit better."

But in the very moments when he was cursing himself, Frobisher knew something deeper than soldiers' grievances and social discontents was worrying him. The first week he was back in Saddlebridge he had gone round to the Little Theatre. They were doing *Hindle Wakes* and Fleur was playing Fanny. He liked her handsome insolence; she wore her shawl as proudly as though it were a queen's cloak. "I'll bet she's a beezum, that one," he heard a woman behind him say. "Off or on, she's a corker, I'll bet." At the interval he pushed back the iron pass-door, fell up the four small square stairs on to the stage, walked warily past the canvas walls, the taut ropes and thin iron stanchions into the stone corridor and up a flight of stairs.

The transition from warm comfort, plush seats, and holiday air of the stalls to this world of hard work, illusion, tawdriness, and poky discomfort always made him feel strange and an intruder. The stage-hands were new, had stared suspiciously but not questioned his firm, decisive passage; obviously, he knew his way. Partly through climbing the stairs and partly because he hadn't yet seen Fleur his heart was pounding a little, his mouth dry. He stopped outside a door bearing three cards:

MARTHA JENNINGS
FLEUR ARMITAGE
KATHERINE WEST

and knocked. Martha, whose mother was Italian, was forty and a bittock, and having fallen down a "trap" when playing *Little Lord Fauntleroy* at a tender age asserted she

had never been quite right since. Her admirers said she could play anything from Sweeney Todd to Juliet and be immense. That wasn't far wrong. Katherine West, he didn't know. Martha's voice asked: "Who is it, darling?" having read the phrase in recent society gossip.

"Frobisher—Martin," said Frobisher, feeling foolish. "Coo!" said Martha, who mixed Cockney and Lancashire with fine impartiality, "come in, love."

It was a long, narrow room with a making-up table running the whole length on the right and half a dozen mirrors of remarkably diversified sizes and shapes hung or propped against it. You must be a hundred per cent romantic to see a dressing-room such as this and preserve a sense of the stage's glamour, he thought. Hanging like old flycatchers were a couple of faded streamers formed of old telegrams of congratulation that nobody had had the heart to take down. Towels torn and dirty with lipstick and greasepaint hung on nails. Behind Martha's mirror was a faded green velvet doll and pasted on the wall beside it some ribald verses in French which she couldn't read but had every reason, she said, to believe were designed to give the Watch Committee "a fit". She knew different versions to suit her moods. The table itself was littered with a score of sticks of paint most of them looking incredibly old and filthy. Martha, near the door, was unwinding a sheet from her waist and bosom that had been making her figure ample enough for Mrs. Hawthorne. After giving Frobisher a refreshing glance at her form she wound herself up again, but she paused to fire off: "Here's our Martin. Are you in front, darling? What a rotten notice you gave us in the *Gazette*. Never mind, nobody reads your rotten rag. How's it going? Don't tell me; I know it's worse than that." But he wasn't

listening. He was looking at Fleur. She sat tilted forward on a bent chair re-doing up her eyelashes on which with a sharpened stick of wood she was making tiny globules—one at the end of each lash. Frobisher thought it looked horrid. Her cheeks were extremely rosy with paint and her eyes were blued on the lids and beneath them. Her mouth was encarnadined and shaped like a rather too large Cupid's bow. She turned her head, went on using her eye-black and asked in a hard, toneless voice: "Hello, darling, how are you? Don't come near me. I'm sticky." He murmured something incoherent and turned to Katherine West, a plump girl with large opal eyes who was smoking a cigarette and sitting back on a wicker travelling basket.

"These rude people will never introduce us," he said holding out his hand. "I'm Frobisher. They all curse me for bribing the management to put on plays half in dialect that none of them can speak."

"I've heard about you," said Katherine shyly, sweeping her skirt with her eyelashes. "I'd love to play in something of yours."

"Hi! young woman, come off of it," cried Martha. "If Fleur has finished with him—as I suppose she has since the galloping major took her up—he's my property." Martha hopped across, hugged him and left a red smear on his cheek with her lips.

"All right, Martha," he said, "your strong suit is supposed to be work and virtue. It was Mary who ——"

"Don't be biblical, ducky," she said, "or you shan't take me home to supper." He looked towards Fleur to see what she wanted to do but she was still painting her mask. Martha, catching his glance, said, mischievously:

"Oh, Fleur is booked with the Major—nightly at 10-45, matinées Saturday at two, cigarettes by Abdulla and wines by Clicquot—ain't you sweetheart?"

"Don't give away *all* my secrets," said Fleur laughing. But she didn't seem to mind. She shot a quick look at Frobisher to see how he had taken it, but he was offering Katherine West a cigarette. The call-boy hammered on the door and cried in his boyish sing-song voice: "Act Two, ladies and gentlemen, please." A moment later Charley Fry's rich, unctuous voice paused at the door. "Now then, you young women," he said, opening the door, "none o' these tales. . . . Well, if it isn't our Martin! Hey, lad, how arta? Well, hasn't he grown? Come round and have a look at mi empty bottle next time we're off. Well, and when are we doin' another o' them rotten plays o' thine? Here, before I go. I heard a tale to-day——"

"Charley darling, we're too young," cried Fleur.

"Nay lass, not for this. When I was in Galway going round with a fit-up they brought some folk over from Innisfree . . . never seen the mainland before——"

"Act Two, ladies and gentlemen, *plee-ase*!" cried the treble voice.

Charley went on unheeding. "And they'd never seen a looking-glass. Well, one chap picked up a bit o' broken mirror an' looked in it. 'Mi father!' sez he, 'by the Holy Mother o' God,' as soon as he saw his own face, which he'd never seen before. And he pops the bit o' glass into his pocket. But he couldn't forbear to take it out now and then and take a surreptitious peep at it. 'What's that, in the name o' the divvle?' asks his wife—and there was no more love lost between 'em than would divide two leaves of a book. ' 'Tis my own business,' he sez, 'and none o' yourn.' And presently he takes another sly peep at it. So,

sure enough, i' the middle o' the night, his wife gets up from beside him and takes the bit o' glass out of his pocket and goes to the window and by the light o' the moon, and 'twas a fine moon that night, she looks in the glass. ' 'Tis just as I thought,' she sez, 'a woman, and by Jasus, an ugly ould bitch at that!' "

Charley bustled out. "Come on, yo' lasses," he said, "Wilfred'll be throwing three fits on the stage."

"To say nothing of prompting us from the play we're not doing till next week," said Martha, also going.

"And telling us we can't be heard beyond the fourth row of the stalls," said Katherine demurely, arranging her dress.

Fleur got up too. "Are you coming round again after the show, darling?" she asked taking a final look at her blued eyes in the mirror.

Frobisher was as if an instrument had drawn all feeling from him.

"I don't think so," he said dully. She turned and flashed a bright smile at him. His eyebrows crinkled, and he tried to impart a wise, and cynical twist to his eyes and mouth, as if to say: "After all, I'm not a child. Go on, my dear, have a good time; I'm older than you. You'll learn, some day."

He said: "It's a poor fish that doesn't know when he's unhooked and thrown back. Good-bye. See you one day." He didn't look at her, but he felt her mouth was showing a little relief at getting rid of him so easily, a little scorn, and some small anguish at her own callousness. He walked down the stone steps, coldly angry, not wanting to speak or meet any one's eyes. By God, who did she think he was? He had always suspected she was capable of this. So, so. It had happened. He saw Wilfred at the

other end of the narrow channel behind the flats, waving him to come across, but he pretended not to see; and promptly despised himself for ignoring the invitation. He trod on tip-toe down the wings past Charley waiting his cue and refreshing his memory from the printed play. Pince-nez on his nose, he looked like a parson got up as a bookmaker. Charley glanced up and gave him an expansive smile but dropped quickly back into his part. The play was going on. He caught a glimpse of the players and Martha stared at him without allowing recognition to leap in her eyes. Work was afoot; no hanky-panky now; he admired that. The stage glowed with light as a painting set about with candles; across the harsh footlights he caught the usual glimpse of pale faces swimming in misty blueness until they merged into vagueness. He suddenly thought, "That's what it will be like after death—a merging into the common sea of thought and energy—no personal immortality." As he crept back into his stall, the thought calmed him, as the proximity of a shell, narrowly escaped, had calmed him in France. But it didn't last. Fleur came on the stage and he could think of nobody else but her and the man who would come for her at 10-45. She was acting as if nothing in life existed outside that stage, as if she didn't know he was sitting there, tortured. Tortured? Well, what of it? Whose fault was it? He had never asked her to marry him. He hadn't written for weeks at a time, he had had his mistress, he had taken it for granted, in his colossal conceit, that Fleur would be waiting for him; he had told himself he didn't love her, that women were a damned nuisance, and anyway, he couldn't afford to marry anybody, and. . . . And yet he knew quite surely he loved her, and that she knew also; and that she knew he would return and expect to find

her ready to be his beloved. Christ! of course she knew, knew they were made for one another, that while they each might have affairs, nobody else would ever do for either of them. "Oh, my dear, my dear, what are you doing to me and to yourself?" he thought. "This blasted major fellow, whoever he may be, brainless, hulking, wealthy, nincompoop, handsome, dashing, horse-riding, Rolls-Roycey brewer or iron-founder—what do you hope for from him? God Almighty, how dare you? How dare you sacrifice us both?"

He fidgeted in his seat and his thoughts surged hither and thither, condemning himself, her, determining to wait till after the show and have it out, contemptuously asking himself why he was dramatizing the incident, until, hot with nervous stress he got up and went out. The night was very beautiful, the air so fresh and balmy after rain that it folded you about as a warm cloak. Every star was sparkling in the blue-black sky. The night had colour —pale violets and dim, dusky reds and the sky was streaked with lines of silver and gold near the moon. But the night's beauty only tore his heart the more. He knew that he loved her; and that its importance ranked with death.

CHAPTER XIV

MARTHA RANG him up next day at the office. She had asked in her usual hearty fashion "Is that you love?" twice before the call had reached him. "I've been getting off with the editor—or was it the commissionaire?" she asked.

"Both, dear, I should think," he said. He never felt quite at ease with Martha at the other end of the line. He knew the switchboard girl always listened in when "one of Mr. Frobisher's actresses" was on the line. But he couldn't be cold when she was so affectionate. Besides, he was fond of her.

"Well, you great soft lump," she said, "why didn't you come round to take me out to supper? You know you invited me."

"Sorry, darling," he said, "but I was so overcome by your acting I had to leave early. But I'll take you to lunch if you like."

"Dearest," she said, "this is so sudden. Will you take me to the Mitre? We've had a hell of a morning. Wilfred's been—coo! You should have heard what he called me, and me the mother of——"

"The Mitre, my dear, at one-thirty," he said with firmness.

"All right, ducky," she said, "I understand. I object to people getting free entertainment as much as you do."

Martha was at once a joy and an embarrassment. He found her wearing a Cossack fur hat with red feather, a short velvet coat trimmed with fur and red knee-boots. Her face was painted with precision and vigour and she left you in no doubt that she was accustomed to being observed and overheard. Scores of Burnham people more or less consciously included Martha in "those for whom our prayers are desired" every Sunday night. Theatre folk would have declared it a pity, anyway, for them not to have *somebody* to pray for. She was almost as tall as he and her face was often turned towards Frobisher's as they walked the gangway down the Mitre dining-room. He was proud of her but he could have wished to dilute her style a little.

"I shall have caviare and a sole done in butter, a wing of pheasant and some Bordeaux," she announced with determination.

"I believe", he said, "you loathe caviare as much as I do."

"Damn it," she said, "*somebody* in Burnham must pretend to be civilized. I like my caviare straight from the Caucasus," she said in a loud voice, adding in a whisper: "They'll talk about that for a week, love." She gossiped through the courses—how Wilfred said if things didn't improve they'd have to play two matinées extra for nothing and how Charley, heavily sarcastic, asked why they didn't change the bill on Thursdays like the pictures and give a song and dance show on Sunday evenings, and then they could bring beds down to the theatre and make a "proper job of it". "We were all so het up," said Martha, "that nobody even made a joke about the beds. But, honestly, I'm all out—hook, line and sinker. This week I'm Lancashire, next week but one I'm Queen Elizabeth and

after that I'm a Scotch fisher girl. Honest to God, if I were to have chloroform at the moment I should come round talking Hindustani. Charley manages to come on with his lines stuck in the bottom of a hat and half the other men are suffering from a peripatetic complaint that carries them regularly to the prompt corner so that when somebody should be kissing you and you've strung yourself up for it, you find your lover is yards away admiring a picture. They're lazy devils, the men. Half the time we have to learn their parts as well as our own."

"Men", said Frobisher, judicially, "are never so good at the mechanical side of the business—too much imagination. Anyway, how the hell can you do a new play every other week? Before you've forgotten the one you did last week, you're playing another and long before you know that one, you're rehearsing a third."

"Well, darling," she said, "half the plays are the same play—we've only to call one another different names."

"I know," he said, "the last thing you did of mine was less Frobisher and more Martha Jennings every night."

"Yes, love," she said, "we nearly got a laugh out of the audience by Saturday night, didn't we?"

"It's a b.f.'s game writing plays anyway. I sent one to Wilfred and he said he'd do it if I'd take the war out of it. When I told him there wasn't any war in it he was quite hurt. And then the *Courier* sends that old spinster to write about 'em—the last time she said it was a bad play because it was a mixture of tragedy and comedy. Jesus wept!"

"No worse than your junior reporters declaring 'Miss Jennings acted with fine restraint' when I was off with a chill on the liver. I take no notice of the papers—except when they praise me. As Ellen Terry used to say:

'To hell with criticism—praise is good enough for me.'"

Frobisher watched her with pleasure. She had eyes even browner than his own (he always felt comfortable with brown-eyed people—the dreamers, the good-natured folk), a full mouth, a long irregular nose too broad at the base, sensitive nostrils and long, slender hands. She was a passionate, generous, likable woman with nothing petty about her. He felt more than friendship for her. An elder sister? No, he could never have talked to an elder sister as he talked to her. He might, he thought, one day put his head on her bosom and weep. A mother then? Well, more mother than anything else.

Without preamble he suddenly asked: "Why aren't you married, Martha? Here you are—brains, talent, looks, passion——"

"Hush, love," she said, dropping her eyes in mock shyness; "what will people think if they hear you?" Presently she said: "You don't suppose I've never wanted a baby, Martin, do you? Nearly every woman does who's over twenty-five. Most women never wake up till they've had one. Well, I wakened all right." She dabbed her cigarette end on her plate and then looked up. "It died, love. Oh and it was such a lovely thing. A girl. Six months."

Frobisher said: "I'm awfully sorry if it hurts, Martha."

She smiled. "No, not now. We weren't married . . . we were playing in *The Silver King* and . . . Oh, there wasn't any tragedy in it—any betrayal or rot of that sort. I loved him and we took a chance and I was glad about the baby coming. He got another job and went to America soon after she was born. I didn't mind that—I'd saved and he left me fifty pounds. We knew that was the finish between us—it seemed clean and straight and all right. I

cared a bit more than he did that's all. I don't think either of us cared enough. Well, Jessie died, and I got another job and I've had to work like hell ever since. Another actor wanted to marry me but I don't think I want to marry anybody on the stage. I must be primitive dear . . ." she was merry again now. "I want a man who's making railway engines or sailing ships or flying aeroplanes. Acting and writing—girls' jobs, aren't they?" He knew she was only half serious but he said: "If you put all you've got into 'em I think they're all right. Every time I create something I seem to shrink—something goes out of me and I can't put it back."

"Don't imagine", he said, "that I haven't felt like you. When I first went to France I was exalted, thought I was for the first time doing a man's job—hard, back-breaking, needing strength and nerve—something women couldn't do. I used always to say men ought to do work women couldn't; that clerking was a girl's job. Well, soldiers' work turned out to be idiots' work—work for robots, machines or animals. Tanks did it better, and steam-shovels. Now, I'm inclined to think it needs more guts to write or speak the truth than go over the top. Anyway, scores of thousands did go over the top, and hardly anybody deals in the truth. Writing isn't so damned easy, anyway; it isn't so much the craft of putting things on paper—though that's hard enough—it's getting your stuff, knowing more of life and seeing deeper into people. Reminds me of the mill mechanic who put in a new boiler. When he made out his bill he jotted down the shillings and sixpences for nuts and bolts and odds and ends and then he added '£20 for knowing how'."

Presently he said: "Martha, I'm going to ask you something I couldn't ask anybody else."

She lit another cigarette without offering him one—a sign of perfect understanding, he thought—and said: "That's nearly the nicest thing you've ever said to me, love."

He spoke slowly. "If a nice girl is seduced by a man—I don't mean raped—I mean when she's almost as willing as he is—does she feel afterwards that she belongs to him? Would she be safer against other men's onslaughts?"

He half expected her to run away in her Cockney with "Coo!" and "Blimey!" She did, in fact, start off banteringly, "I don't think I ever *was* a nice girl——"

"Rot. Don't tell me. You didn't give yourself lightly—you're a bit of a Puritan, it's my belief."

She laughed. "I remember one manager—monocled—no end of a dog, *he* thought, saying to me, 'I hope you're a vargin, mi dear.' 'I am as far as you're concerned,' I said." She blew a ring of smoke. "That was a job I *didn't* get." She pondered. "Are you thinking of seducing somebody, Martin?" Her voice had become gentle.

"I don't know, Martha. I'm dreadfully worried." He went on haltingly. "This girl—I imagine she's longing for excitement—probably bitten by the germ of seeing no reason why she can't know all men know—wanting to tear down the veil. This is frightfully crude, but——"

"There's a devil of a lot of difference between talking loosely and living loosely, Martin. Chastity is sacred with most women. The first leap is a scaring business—a shock to mind and body too. I suppose you know it's usually—well—extremely unpleasant for the girl—violation——"

"Yes, I know." So he wasn't Molly's first lover. He was glad of that. He knew that it would never make any difference to him if a woman he loved had taken a lover before him. He had read of men rejecting women in

scorn on that account. It seemed stupid, unjust. He went on: "If the fellow who loved her had an intuition she was in danger of falling for somebody who fascinated her—largely because she wanted excitement, and the man who loved her determined to save her from herself. . . . God, I'm talking like a film. . . ." He stopped and looked at Martha appealingly.

"She might be so outraged she'd never want to set eyes on you again. Women aren't naturally loose or light as—as men are. Don't think me hateful, Martin. But men go with women they don't care a damn for—like taking food and drink. Even nice men do. I know. They've told me. But nice women don't—they can't and they don't want to. They've got to be fond of a man before that happens—unless they're forced into it by starvation or what's next door to it. Once a woman's defences have been broken, it's probably easier for her to come a cropper again; but I believe if a woman really loved a man and he seduced her she might love him more than ever. Oh, my dear, this is all mixed up anyhow. But don't imagine because girls talk brazenly that they're different to-day from yesterday. Women only want one lover, if he'll stick to them, and they don't want to give themselves till they're in love. Women aren't always putting it on and pretending when they're coy and shy. It's part of their make-up. And women who become notorious only do so as a rule because a man's let 'em down—left 'em for somebody else." She stopped, a little confused by her own forthright pronouncements. Then she asked: "You love Fleur, don't you, dear?"

He nodded. "I suppose it's written all over me," he said.

"Why shouldn't it be? This major—it won't last, not if you've any sense."

"Well," he said, "I'm not sure I have, you know."

So Martha couldn't help him. He was a fool for supposing she could. Nobody could help you, finally. Happiness—from within. His mind was circling round in platitudes. He thought, "I've come to something, my heavens." Who was the damn man, anyway?

Martha said: "His people are the brewers—Nasmiths—you know, Nasmith's Number Nines—'Life-savers' our fireman calls 'em, meat and drink. He's Tory candidate for West Burnham. And talk of the devil——"

Frobisher saw them at the same moment. The man was tall, and ruddy, short nose and deep chin—flat bowler hat, club tie and light tweed coat. "Race glasses and a tightly-rolled umbrella and he's right for the paddock," Frobisher thought. They were laughing—"one of those small-talk men who laugh easily—live in a perpetual joke —never earned a bob—life-made-easy-man," he thought. Fleur looked slightly confused as she met his glance, the woman in her supplanting the actress; then she beamed on Martha.

Frobisher sat staring in front of him and felt his blood being charged with energy or emotion until his body was stiffened—as if he were being changed into an automaton. He got up, went across to Fleur's table and spoke. He didn't know what he said. He was half expecting something would happen. Fleur introduced them. He looked into Nasmith's hard, blue eyes and nodded without speaking. He turned to Fleur and spoke about her performance as Fanny—analytically, authoritatively; she mustn't flaunt her independence so much—was too harsh on her first appearance—robbed herself of sympathy; then he nodded again to Nasmith and left. Fleur had stared, bewildered, a little frightened at the unspoken

hostility. When he had gone she flushed and felt furious. Nasmith said: "Queer fellows, these writers."

Frobisher sat down again, with Martha. "You look like death, dear," she said.

"I feel like it. Let's go."

He longed to rush out but he dallied, paying the bill with immense deliberation, helping Martha on with her coat, and then walked out with stiff strides, extremely slowly, looking straight ahead as if on parade and glancing not at all in Fleur's direction. He knew that he had been rude and that if Nasmith had resented it, he would have hit him. He knew he was behaving badly, and for the moment he didn't care.

CHAPTER XV

He plunged into work. The streak of iron in him helped. He told himself he had never been sure that women were requisite to a man's life; that theories that every creator was only successful inasmuch as a woman became his complement, that every man was partly feminine and every woman partly masculine, and that God Almighty had a trick by means of sex, of fitting one to the other to make the perfect whole, was tommy-rot (damned stupid, anyway, for how often did perfection result? People made the most ghastly mistakes, and if the walking out together that he observed of short men with enormous women were God working His purpose, the price was too prodigious altogether. Lord, how comic they looked). He didn't believe in this "inspiration by woman" idea, he told himself. Men were at their best living together—in lumber camps, in the army, on board ship. Look at the magnificent men the navy and the merchant marines produced, men to whom women were only playthings, a diversion—and then ask how needful women were. Good God, 500 years ago even in England women were married off—sold off—in their early teens to the highest bidder (virtually that, since the parents looked to birth, rank and money as the only points that mattered) and women were as happy under those conditions as they were to-day. A measure of

ownership, of being subdued to a man's will, of (if need be) being beaten, did the average woman good. She sought subjection, brutal strength, men who domineered over their fellows—preachers, boxers, footballers, actors, barristers—anybody in the limelight. Let a man win the V.C., or swim the channel, or prove an eloquent evangelist and a horde of women would be at his feet. Horde was the word. Damn it all, his own small successes proved that. Let him go to a ball the week his play ran at the Little Theatre and lovely women laid themselves out to dance with him—moths round a fleeting candle. A contemptible business. Wealth, possessions, notoriety—these were the magnet for women. And these women—bought if women ever were bought—jeered and sneered at the courtesans. How different were they? Was there a girl in Burnham he couldn't marry, given a play that made him world-famous? Devil a one, he thought. He would become a good match. Look at the pretty women accompanying bald, mis-shapen, ugly, podgy, leering men! Bought, bought, bought! Oh he flogged himself into a fine frenzy of disparagement! And he looked at women walking the square, in the tramway-cars, in the trains, women wearing expensive clothes and riding in luxurious cars, women who were so often no better looking than washerwomen, and he thought, first: "Well, God evens things out. He never gives the looks and the brains and the money to the same people"; and secondly, he thought: "By God, it's a miracle; that anybody should be slaving, as some man is slaving, to keep a creature such as this. By heavens, but they're lucky, these women; and they haven't enough intelligence to know how lucky they are; they take it for granted. Down to their warehouses, their offices, their workshops, the men come, regular as

robots, slaving to keep their pets, and such pets!" Women talked of emancipation. By heavens, it was the men who wanted emancipating.

And it must be granted that Burnham women gave these thoughts more point and justification than in most towns. They were the plainest, dowdiest lot, he had ever struck (he told himself). See them arrive at the Wednesday evening concerts of the Burnham Beethoven Society that only the Jews and the aliens preserved from bankruptcy—arrive pince-nezed, beshawled, packed in moral ice (as if *they* ever stood in danger), bored to death, nodding over the expensive annotated programme where-on a satirical music critic endeavoured to simplify and reduce genius for third-form minds; or better still, see the serried rows of Burnham women's choir in their pale pink, massed on the platform like blown blossoms, like children who had outgrown themselves, fat but simple, dressed in their grandmother's styles, and expressionless as so many suet puddings.

In such soured mood as this he dived into work. Saw temporary majors and captains who couldn't reconcile themselves to slipping back into obscurity sally forth and don their khaki riding-breeches and volunteer as Major This and Captain That for work during the railway strike. He got sick of trying to see business men who took two hours for lunch and whose secretaries (this post-war in-novation) never knew when they would be back; he looked down his nose at men who were only half-shaved, and he pulled Grundy's leg whose wife had got so sick of Grundy's tales of how he had scrubbed tables spotless in the army and brewed ambrosial tea that she had gone to her mother's and left him to exercise his talents alone. He stumbled on dark paths as if he had never known a

shell-hole, complained if the bacon were cold, saw men returned to Parliament who had folded their arms during the fighting, attended Profiteering meetings where toy dealers admitted their normal profit was 100 per cent, and took a zestful interest in the Lancashire mill boom. He saw mills change hands at the rate of twenty a day and Lancashire people make £7,000,000 a week profit. (Men who wore clogs gave champagne and potato-pie suppers, mills built new chimneys to dodge excess profits, Manchester business men played golf or went trout fishing to avoid orders they didn't want, operative spinners retired to Blackpool and solicitors' clerks kept yachts at Deganwy. Six-figure men were as common as blackberries, old-established cotton families left the county for good, and turned from zephyrs in cloth to zephyrs on the Riviera, and from Madras shirtings to trips East of Suez. He watched Lancashire go stark, raving mad. Ten-shilling shares sold for £7 and carters tossed quids on the bank counter and told the teller: "Ha' one for thysel'." Comedy and tragedy walked hand in hand.)

He witnessed a number of by-elections, saw the remarkable phenomenon of a gentleman with mincing manners and pearl-buttoned boots returned by coal-miners in one place and a coal-owner who knew his job rejected ignominiously by miners in another—though it is true that these miners lived sometimes in houses of one room, with one door, and one closet for a whole street, and that when a man was killed at the pit, his family ate and slept with the coffin in their midst. He saw Asquith returned at Paisley and enjoyed being directed about the town by Scots who worked on a method of elimination, saying: "The Toon Hall ye want? Aye, weel, ye see the clock over there? Aye, weel, it's no there; and ye see the

spire yon? Aye, weel, it's no there eether"—this with considerable gravity. He enjoyed moving about on these elections among men who wrote what they imagined would look like the truth read through the red, blue or white spectacles of their respective readers. And he learnt it is almost as easy to lie by photographs as by letterpress. He saw miners—good-hearted men—cajoled into cheering the Tory candidate by his wife who looked so pretty and pitiful that they hadn't the heart to refuse; and he saw them walk away cursing, cold, wet and hungry.

He spent Armistice day 1,000 feet down a coal-pit in the bowels of the earth where he knocked his head a sickening smack on every low beam he passed beneath. (One young collier was blissfully unaware of the "silence" and whistled gaily till half a dozen clouts on his clog from a deputy who daren't, of course, speak, drove the knowledge into him. Then he shut up sheepishly and sat on his clogs with the rest. Frobisher thought the pit nearer to hell than anything he had seen—this inferno where, peering up side alleys, he saw by a lamp's light a glistening white body lying on its side, sweat trickling among the coal-dust.) He met a Yankee reporter who chewed a cigar at a conference the while he hammered a silent typewriter, and said: "Guy, you're on a big sheet," and described how his news editor in San Francisco had once given him a stiff job, asking him to go to the wife of a murdered man and say: "Mrs. Vandervell, would you mind telling me if it's true you murdered Mr. Vandervell?"

Frobisher enjoyed his work and said newspaper jobs were the finest in the world.

He lived for weeks in Glasgow during the Scottish coal-strike, among the square-hatted and square-toed men and the bonnie women—big, brawny, and magnificently

fashioned for mothers—drew his own beer and picked his own sausages at a quick-lunch bar, and spent a thrilling short railway journey in company with a girl—red-lipped and blue-eyed—who sat on three men's knees in turn and kissed them with zest. He followed the Prince of Wales round cotton mills, fish wharves, sweet factories, saw him launch ships, cast relief busts of himself in steel, saw flung into his car roses, lilies, monkeys-up-sticks, teddy bears and pieces of seaside rock. He recorded what the Prince said and what, maybe, the Prince would like to have said. He saw murderers sentenced to death and was amazed by the calm of men who swore they were innocent and who were less moved than the steely judge who wore the black cap; he attended various courts where coroners, judges, and barristers apparently strove to prevent anybody hearing what they said. He wrote in trains, on tramway-cars, and most often on post-office telegraph counters, parting with sheets one by one so that long before the message was finished he hardly knew what the beginning was like or whether he had repeated himself. He shouted stories at the top of his voice over hundreds of miles of telephone wire when only minutes were left before the edition went to press and when there were at least six chances to one against it getting into the paper accurate. Yet usually it did. He ferreted out murders and drank with Scotland Yard inspectors who had an infinite capacity for being both friendly and frigid, so that one day they consumed beer or played billiards with you and the next were aloof as the Prince of Wales's secretary when asked to fix up an exclusive interview with H.R.H. He interviewed pit-lassies and Cabinet Ministers, supped one night off fish and chips and the next ate a two-guinea dinner.

He climbed The Great Gable carrying an umbrella (probably the only man who has ever done so) and joined rock climbers in their song parodies:

> That highly knowing, back and toeing—
> trumpet blowing Paladin, the Problem-climbing
> Bore-O

and sang with gusto:

> Haul, haul, haul, my feet are slipping
> My hand holds all are loose and wet,
> Oh keep me very tight,
> For my balance isn't right,
> I've eternity below me, don't forget.

And all the time the work thrilled him.

To be in the newspaper office at night when the building throbbed with the vibration almost of a ship and the air smelt everywhere of heat and printer's ink and of paper; to sit in his room and have brought to him a copy of an early edition, warm and moist from the press, with maybe a column story in it beneath his name—that was magnificent. The difficulties of getting the news, the petty snubs from jumped-up folk who knew no better, were forgotten. Here was the newly-born, the created, the living thing. He would cry as he glanced through the pages: "Here's a bloody good story about the train smash from old Grundy—see he's interviewed the driver, guard, stoker—the whole perishing issue?"—and he would march off into the subs.' room and ask: "I say—aren't you going to initial that story of Grundy's—marvellous stuff." He got as much pleasure out of another man's good work as if he had written it himself; it was as if a man had painted a good picture or written a poem. This enthusiasm got

him into repeated rows with the sub-editors. When his stories were hacked about and destroyed he complained bitterly. "Christ Almighty," he would say, "you chaps can't see wood for trees! You get stuff in black and white, handed to you on a plate, and even then you can't see it's a story. Reporters have got to see stories when they're nebulous—floating about in the air—half formed. We start with half an idea and a tenth of a fact and we hand you the finished, sculptured article—and you take a blasted hammer and knock the legs off it." And the subs. would yell—rather like a theme leaping about in an orchestra from violins to wood wind and from brass to 'cellos: "You, Frobisher—why, you can't cough under a column"; "none of your damned highbrowism"; "quarts into pint-pots won't go"; "columns with elastic sides are out of stock"; "we come out every day, not once a month like the parish magazine you were trained on." But most of the argument was good-humoured enough. He was fond of telling them: "One night the end of the world will happen, and you'll make an item of it or tuck it away among the shipping and cotton reports." Or again: "You know the story don't you, about the chief sub. who left out the scoop on the bishop's murder because he was tight for space and he knew the opposition wouldn't have it?" and, "You know Northcliffe takes visitors into the reporters' room and says 'This is where we create the paper' and then into the subs.' room and announces, 'This is the mechanical department'?"

But this bickering was the measure of his delight in his work.

He learnt that trawlers can play cock-a-doodle-doo on their sirens and that wives and sweethearts can tell from

the hooting when their men's ship comes in and out; that good fish is sent to manure works when it won't fetch a halfpenny a pound; he found out about curious games—that dart-throwers can hit a match head at seven feet and set it alight, that whippets are dieted on grilled meat, brown bread soaked in beef tea, with an occasional egg or piece of boiled fish and that though children may sometimes go short, the racing dog rarely does; that a pierrot's repertoire may easily include forty songs besides duets, trios, sketches, dances and "business"; that a full peal used by handbell ringers numbers 160 bells varying from those one-inch across the bell mouth to those fourteen inches and that on a final rehearsal day a band may play "William Tell" for ten hours; and that a trotting "pacer" moves his legs on each side in unison, elephant-wise. He learnt that cotton-weavers can talk to one another from one end of a tramway-car to the other moving their lips without sound, that concertinas are made in four pitches, treble, tenor, baritone and bass and that concertina bands are especially fond of "Maritana" and "Il Trovatore"; that "knockers-up" in some towns are organized in "watches" with 150 members, under their own president and with their own watchman; and that a "knocker-up" sometimes knocks up other "knockers-up"; that handloom weavers still work in Macclesfield garrets weaving silk ties of great beauty; that bread and milk is a fine diet for canaries when they are ill, and that a drop of brandy in their water after coming from a show is a recognized pick-me-up; that buildings in Northwich are often made "to lift"—so that when subsidences occur through brine-pumping, the whole house or bank or shop can be raised on its steel foundation by means of hydraulic jacks holding a quart or two of water, and that in this

way chemists' shops have been lifted seven or eight feet without upsetting a bottle.

He delighted in these curious pieces of knowledge.

Moreover, he went to Ireland, and came upon and recorded happenings more sinister and evil than any he had known in the war. Belfast—where, as one of his colleagues wittily remarked, there are only two sorts of people—those who make handkerchiefs and those who don't use them; Belfast he saw in the tempest of a war half religious, half political; Belfast, where the old woman in the Falls Road complained: "It's terrible quiet and lonesome—not a shot the night"; Belfast, where the mother whose little boy was shot by accident said, on being sympathized with: "Oh, but he died lovely. He sent for his little drum, his Ulster drum, and he beat a faint roll and he said 'To hell with the Pope' and he went straight to the arms of Jesus"; Belfast, where journalists—Catholics and Protestants—had a trick of joking grimly to one another saying: "We're getting rid o' ye one by one." Armoured cars with Vickers guns patrolled the streets, infantry in steel helmets with bayonets fixed threaded the thoroughfares, ambulances clanged, machine-guns rattled, bombs crashed, and occasional rifle shots cracked. He rode in an armoured car and had pointed out to him metal street boxes that were favourite sniping posts, and he passed down streets where every door and window was barricaded with furniture and mattresses, streets whose inhabitants on one side were Orange and on the other Catholic. He saw houses with a hole knocked in the inner wall so that shooting could be done through it, the flash unobserved from the street. One day a bomb killed or wounded nearly twenty children dancing round a maypole, on another, a whole family—father and

brothers—were lined up and shot in their own dining-room before the mother's eyes; time after time men were found in the road, shot, riddled, their coats dragged forward over their heads. He wrote messages standing at the post office counter, enlarging the figures of killed and wounded as other reporters dropped in with the latest news. "In France," he said, "you knew who was on your side; here. . . ." He went to the border between Ulster and the Free State where sandbagged posts were held on the Ulster side flying tiny Union Jacks and he put on a borrowed trench coat, stuffed a revolver in his pocket and rode in a Crossley tender at sixty miles an hour between one strong-post and another after midnight whilst an occasional bullet from the Free State sang past. But the most alarming moment was when with screeching brakes the tender pulled up to avoid running down an Irishman driving his pig along the road at dead of night! The cruelty, ruthlessness and savagery on both sides of the Belfast war appalled him. He hated the place. Curfew was at 9 p.m. After that he sat in his hotel or went to bed and heard firing, bombing and machine-gunning; every morning had its casualty list. Yet business men played golf, wives and daughters went to the pictures as usual and Ulster men swore if it weren't for the newspapers nobody would know anything was wrong. Dublin was rather different. What he saw of Dublin struck him as being less sinister; he heard great shootings as he lay in bed and awoke expecting to find twenty people dead—and occasionally nobody was even hit! "Black and tans" and Republicans ambushed and raided and "shot up" and slew one another; men were hunted like dogs, and shot down like dogs. Yet, perhaps because he never saw the city at its worst, or because the Southern Irishman is

more picturesque, Dublin, to Frobisher, was more likable. Humour and the grotesque and the absurd would creep in. When the hotel was guarded and possessed by Free State soldiers (so well-dressed in green tunics and new brown leather belts and leggings that it was hard to tell privates from officers), Rory O'Connor the Irregular who was besieged in the Four Courts, sent emissaries to the hotel to answer Press inquiries; and when you went to see him he sat with two revolvers on the table before him and behaved most affably. Frobisher nearly impaled himself on a bayonet entering the *Dublin Chronicle* office—but, upstairs, gossip and some measure of entertainment went on. There was always a drink and a welcome and an interchange of views. There was the jaunting-car whose jarvey would drive you anywhere in the world for two shillings provided you gave it him decisively, and there was the air of quiet genteel decay over sleepy squares, the glimpses into innumerable small stores where porter was being drunk, the aromatic, peaty smells in narrow streets, and an air that there was always another day after this, that nothing was too important to be interrupted on a visitor's account.

He saw a little boy of seven or eight walking down Grafton Street girt with a thin yellow belt and a toy revolver six inches long in a holster. In the dazzling sunlight people smiled benignantly on him. Michael Collins, Rory O'Connor, De Valera and the Free State itself had all set up publicity agents like so many theatrical companies, and a wit said the only proper thing to do was to put a row of footlights round the country. Frobisher wore a black, soft hat, sympathized with the Sinn Feiners, and was told he resembled Rory O'Connor.

He was thrilled and at times exalted. He thought:

"How the subs. can come down to the office regularly every night I don't know; this is the life"—and yet. . . . He got sick and weary of receiving so many new impressions he had no time to digest and put in order, he felt his mind was getting blurred, confused, as a camera film on which two pictures have been taken. And he often grew tired of questioning, questioning, asking, pleading, dragging out information, weighing evidence, choosing, discarding, and asking all sorts of people to give him their time and attention for the benefit, true, of the community, but the equal benefit of newspaper owners who made large profits out of those who gave their knowledge free. He often felt slightly ashamed of using himself for this end, of succeeding by wit, persuasion, cajolery or, yes, perhaps by chicanery or trickery or small bribery when he knew a direct, plain request would be refused. He asked himself how long he could continue doing it; and immediately afterwards met a news agency reporter who told him over a bottle of stout how a message of his had been telephoned from London to Lloyd George in Paris and had so altered the Government's attitude that fighting and bloodshed in the west had been averted. "That's the stuff," said Frobisher. "It's a great life. Two more bottles of stout."

CHAPTER XVI

BUT THOUGH he had worked terribly hard, with zest and all the energy he could claim, no twenty-four hours passed without his thoughts encompassing Fleur. He never saw a lovely night when stars seemed nearer the earth, he never looked on a tree clothed in snow, or a ploughman against a skyline, without his thoughts racing to her. He found himself using her as the touchstone for his actions—would she have been proud of his achieving this, scorned his attitude to that? He despised himself sometimes for being so romantically minded that he must have a lady looking, in his imagination, on the lists where he jousted, a lady whose gage he would wear. But he still went on. He imagined them together as strolling players or seaside pierrots, terribly hard up. He wrote nonsense songs for her to sing, like this:

> Shy moon is pulling night over her face,
> The quarter has struck, and the hours are in chase;
> O hurry, my dear, the sky's losing its gold,
> And love flies away when the moon has grown old!

and again:

> She took velvet night for a beauty patch
> And a star to wear at her throat,

and he saw himself joining in:

> But he just kept on mending the hole in the thatch
> With the lining he took from his coat.

He imagined her, dimpling her cheeks and being slightly ribald and saying, "Too poetic, darling. Try mine":

> O she was sweet and she was cute,
> But she wouldn't go down the water-chute
> She said: "I like you well, old fruit,
> But I'm not coming down the water-chute!"

And having (in his imagination) taken five and tuppence ha'penny at the evening performance they would go off to their digs arguing who should have the last egg for supper, both of them resolving by hook or crook to make the other eat it. As he pushed open the door he saw himself singing:

> She'd a string of stars about her throat,
> And the pale moon in her hair,

And she'd retort:

> He'd a battered hat and a ragged coat,
> And the price of a tuppenny fare.

O, what was the good of pretending he wasn't in love and that women could be done without? He tried to think angrily of her mouth when it was cruel and of her eyes when they were cold, but he thought the next moment of her bravery, good nature, generosity, her noble carriage and style. Every time he saw a woman whose cheek curved as hers did, who had legs as fine and handsome, whose clothes were cut as hers were, his heart leapt and then died sickeningly within him.

He invented foolish stories in which he dived from a stone jetty into foaming sea to save her when she had slipped off treacherous steps; he saw them occupying a princely suite on a liner—a mysterious young couple, who led the charades and sang their own duets at the concerts; or again, they were living in a cottage on the Arran

Islands, brown and lean and hard in the sun and wind—he studying folk lore to weave into a play, she capturing the tunes the peasants sang and writing fresh words to them. He wasn't actively or constantly unhappy. On the contrary he was exhilarated in mind by the small hardships he was suffering, by the rigidity he had preserved in neither writing to her nor seeking her; he had conquered his impulses and doing so, added some strength to his fibre. He refused to deviate from his ways that they might, ostensibly by accident, meet. He granted himself the freedom of thinking about her; no more. He knew he was in danger of idealizing her, or worshipping a vision that bore less and less likeness to her. Well, that must be chanced. But what gave him most content was that his mind was beginning to be excited by ideas for a new play. His thoughts were leaping; characters were looming up like figures out of a mist, and taking on definition. He was observing faces and streets and incidents with intense zest. He could stroll about Burnham at night and grow excited as he walked past public-houses flaunting their polished chocolate-tiled fronts, figured-glass windows and doors protected by thick, twisted brass rods; as he rode on top of a crowded tram among working-men who sucked and puffed hungrily at pipes and, like as not, spat past him on to the wooden floor with remarkable precision; as he walked down slippery, tortuous ginnels and saw lovers in Hogarthian attitudes in dark corners; as he observed the road to Pennington picked out by yellow lamps climbing and twisting, it seemed, up the dark sky at an angle of twenty degrees; as he walked about the "Bedstead Market"—Burnham's Petticoat Lane, where on this triangular cinder plot within five minutes of the Town Hall, old iron, ice-cream, cheap jewellery, pots,

black puddings, corn cures, fur coats, hens, Burnham rock, love elixirs, linoleum, cough drops and fruit were sold and rifles cracked at the shooting galleries, where roundabouts blared and circled, their horses riding iron rods with a smooth rhythm that always delighted him (he thought the gondolas, a later device which sailed up and down platforms on iron wheels, stupidly pretentious in their red faded plushes and massive mechanism which strips of painted oilcloth tried vainly to conceal). These gigantic, mechanized pieces of amusement with a steam-engine in the middle, with mechanical organs that coughed and blew and ground out the same tune hour after hour, with a brass arm striking the drum and fancily dressed figures in painted steel and wood revolving a half turn right and a half turn left, flourished exceedingly in the midst of highly industrialized communities, where food was won among whizzing wheels, thrusting shafts, and deafening noise. You would have thought men and women who couldn't hear one another talk at their work would have wanted quiet in their play, but they didn't—not on "Bedstead Market". Burnham might be fond of Schubert and Ibsen but half of it clung to Elizabethan ideas of fun —the sight of niggers knocking one another about in the boxing booth, of Burnham lads invited to take the ring and beget bloody noses and cauliflower ears for a cap collection; of a sailor doing gymnastics in tights at the top of a fifty-foot pole, and quacks drawing teeth and cutting corns free. "Yes, Burnham is Old English all right," he thought proudly. Among Frobisher's acquaintances were Joe Tyson, the iron-moulder, who kept wrapped in oiled rags the yard-long skates and black woollen tights he had taken three times to the Fens to skate for the speed championship he brought back in 1905; old Jesse Proud-

foot who used to change his clothes in a hansom cab which took him straight from his mill boilers to Burnham rugby ground and who had played in his twenties against Oxford and Cambridge Universities; Willie Groundwater who could be seen cleaning the cellar windows of his fent dealer's shop but who beat the sprinters from Harvard and Yale; and James Higginbotham who kept a sports outfitters in Westbury Street near the canal and who had done the hat trick and scored his century in the same match against Kent.

For the first time, perhaps, Frobisher was realizing the full flavour of Burnham and of Saddlebridge; the raciness and richness of their characters. The pure dialect in speech had gone long since but it was succeeded among the workpeople by a mixture of dialect, Americanisms and wit of the streets, that was expressive, and often comic. Another development was being observed by Frobisher, the bursting on Burnham and Saddlebridge of the slump that had followed the notorious cotton boom. Manufacturing houses once thought to be safe as the Bank of England were slipping into bankruptcy; publicans who had climbed up a miraculous beanstalk of mill flotations to a get-rich-quick fairyland in which they rode in limousine cars—taking their whippets and a bottle of champagne with them—were drawing "fourpenny" ale again with long faces. The joke on 'Change was: "Owt turned up yet?" "Nobbut trouser bottoms."

Frobisher saw that Ben was himself feeling the strain. Ben had grown quieter, and his waistcoat was getting slack at the bottom. When Martin chaffed him about that he laughed. "Well," he said, "I've taken all sorts o' chemic to do it—and now it's done for me by a parcel o' niggers wearing one loin cloth instead of two or three.

Some of my chaps at the mill have calls on shares they won't pay off in the next three years."

Susan, crocheting across the other side of the fire, asked quietly: "Is it time we sold some of ours, Ben?"

"I don't think it's much use," he said. "I was offered five shillings with each share to take some off Jack Richardson to-day."

Susan said: "I don't pretend to understand it. Everybody said when raw cotton dropped to a shilling there'd be another boom. Now it's at tenpence a pound—and folk are going cracked wi' worry. I found Peter Entwistle praying in church this afternoon. He's never been right since he had to sell those four houses. The doctor said pneumonia killed his wife, but I could have told him something different fro' that. They got a call for another sovereign a week the day she died. There's more ways of killing folk than with bullets, Martin."

Ben walked about restlessly, as if being in the trade gave him responsibility for the tragedy. He wandered to the window and looked out. "You can count thirty-two chimneys from here," he said, "and more than one is sending up money with its smoke. The funny thing is that the folk spinning and weaving are nearly the only folk losing brass. Cotton gamblers at New York, brokers at Liverpool, banks, bleachers, dyers and finishers, and the agents and commission men seem to be doing pretty well so far." A smile fluttered into his eyes. "I met Harry Kershaw to-day. . . ."

"I see he's bought another car with the money he hasn't got," said Susan grimly.

Ben scratched his head. "Harry always says we shall be a long time dead," he said. "He was telling me that his wife saw an advertisement in the *Gazette*, 'Debts pur-

chased', and she wrote saying they were quite willing to sell theirs. She said at a shilling in the pound they'd get something handsome."

Ben walked about again. When he stopped he said: "What I've been trying to tell you—and somehow it wouldn't come out—is that Nat Southern's to be sold up." Susan drew a breath but didn't speak.

"Nat and I were lads together," said Ben after a while, as if Nat needed defence. "He was the best fiddler in Saddlebridge twenty years since and he could waltz in the space of a tea-cup. If he hadn't made his first fortune so quick with his new-fangled shuttle, he wouldn't have been where he is. Easy come, easy go. But you could never upset him. I'm not sure that isn't about the best epitaph a man can have—'You could never upset him.'"

"The gamblers and reckless livers'll always have a champion in you, Ben," said Susan, but there was love in her eyes when she looked at him.

"You always admire the qualities you haven't got," said Ben. "He always had more dash and fire and blood in him than I had; it was Nat who tried the thin ice on Mottram Dam every winter—sometimes with a rope round him held by us—oftener without. And when Townsend's dog went raving mad it was Nat throttled it—and his hands and feet were never much bigger than a woman's. He used to go about as if he were on steel springs—'Spring-heeled Nat' we used to call him."

"How's he taking it?" asked Frobisher.

"He's asked me to go to the sale. He's in bed with flu but he swears he'll be there. You'd better come, Martin. It may be quite a 'do'."

The sale was at 11 a.m. Nat's weaving-shed stood at the bottom of Deanhouse Street near the canal. Watching

bales of cloth dropped down with a thud on lorries, or seeing skips of bobbins swung up aloft from canal boats had been one of Frobisher's pleasures as a boy. He remembered Nat well—an elegant figure in the old days with a square, dull black hat, side-whiskers, a silver-topped black ebony stick, a braided black-tailed coat, and a wide stiff collar with satin cravat. He sometimes rode to the factory on a brown pony, rather slowly as a rule and lost in thought. All his weavers called him "Mester Nathaniel". "If I dunna get my cuts off by Thursday," they said, "Mester Nathaniel'll be tellin' me who my feyther were."

A dozen motor cars were parked in disarray up and down the unevenly paved street. Frobisher saw Nat coming, very bent over his stick. At the corner of the lane Nat stopped, seeing the motor cars, and stared at them with a tightening mouth. Then he tilted his billy-cock a little farther forward over his pale-blue eyes, took a little snuff that was loose in his waistcoat pocket, and walked slowly on, his chin sunk deep over his rusty black waistcoat.

They waited for him at the door. Ben hid his emotion by saying: "Bed's the place for thee, Nat"—dropping more deeply into dialect.

A smile filtered slowly into Nat's eyes like sunlight into a room. "I'm glad to see thee at my funeral," he said. "No doubt there'll be a picking for thee."

Nat pushed open the heavy lumbering door, picked his way over the uneven flags and entered the yarn store. It was empty of people. He mused there. In hanks untidy on the floor, in skips heaped full of cops, yarn lay in gaudy purples, yellows, blues, maroons. From these he had woven cloths that had gone East of Suez. Enchantment

for dusky women spun among this drabness—putting Saddlebridge on the map. Aye. For forty odd years he had been doing it, could have gone on doing it if . . . well, if the boom hadn't turned out to be a boomerang; or alternatively, if he'd had less faith, and not kept all his brass in the trade.

They moved on to where, outside the mill office, the murmur and swell of voices told of the crowd. Along the wall had been fixed a stall—tea, coffee, bovril, scones, apple tart, parkin, Eccles cakes. Nat turned to Ben. "Like a tea party," he said, opening his thin mouth in a grin.

The auctioneer, a perky little man in gold spectacles and a head that twisted like a bird's, had a crowd about him—some in bowler hats, wing collars and velvet-collared overcoats, others in caps and silk neckerchiefs and pointed fancy clogs. Here were brokers battening on misfortune and leagued together; over there spinners he owed money to, and who hoped by a bargain to get a bit back.

Somebody spoke to Nat. "Hello, Mr. Southern, I thought the doctor had forbidden you to come out."

"And if he has? Who are you?"

"From the *Textile Express*. Seem to be great bargains going. Fourpence ha'penny for that coloured yarn!"

Nat turned to Ben. "I paid twenty-eight pence for that, Ben." Nat's voice had drawn attention; men turned; one or two nodded or stared or whispered. The auctioneer paused, inclined his bowler gravely and went on with the curious, bird-like twistings of the head.

"Come and have a coffee," said Nat. They walked over to the stall. "I've got thy yarn-tester," said Ben trying to match Nat's humour. "It'll give thee a homely feeling when tha comes to see me."

"It proved your spinners rascals more than once. I've hung myself largely wi' thy yarn, Ben."

Over coffee Nat said: "You're not here to buy looms Ben?"

"No."

"Because it gives me stomach-ache to see things goin' for nowt. I'd like to see the looms fetch a gradely price. Wilt back me up if I bid?"

"They'll never let thee bid at thy own sale."

"If they stop me, thee go on."

Ben smiled. "More pranks. Power in th' owd engine yet, eh?"

In the weaving-shed picking sticks were at rakish angles, wheels were showing signs of rust, whitewash was turning a dirty yellow.

"A hundred and fifty looms, gentlemen," the auctioneer was saying. "Who'll start me at five hundred? Come, gentlemen, five hundred." A broker nodded. Nat gripped his stick and took snuff audibly. Frobisher thought he saw him tremble with vexation. Five hundred!

"Six hundred—seven—eight hundred," went the bids. "No advance? All finished?"

Nat found his voice. "A thousand!"

The crowd turned. "What's this?" . . . "Mr. Southern can't buy his own stuff . . . mad eh?" . . . "Receiver's sale." . . . "Not a penny in the world—or shouldn't have."

The auctioneer looked at Nat inquiringly.

"Biddin' for Mr. Ben Frobisher," rapped out Nat. Ben nodded.

"Then perhaps Mr. Frobisher'll make his own bids?" After a pause the auctioneer added: "I have a thousand bid, gentlemen." Silence. Then a reluctant voice. "And fifty."

"Eleven hundred," said Ben stoutly. Martin felt like cheering.

"Are you all done, gentlemen? Ah! Eleven-fifty over there."

"Twelve hundred," declared Ben determinedly, with a quick side-glance at Nat. Nat winked. The reluctant voice bid "Twelve hundred and fifty" and Nat pulled Ben away. They stood on one side for a moment.

"You wakened 'em up, Nat."

"Aye; I reckon it cost 'em four hundred pound more than they bargained for, Ben." He sighed. "And now I'll go back to bed, I think." He eyed the looms critically. "They tell me, Ben—" a whimsical smile crept over his face—"they're likely to go to Brazil—where the nuts come from. They're goin' to the right place. They'll need plenty o' nuts to keep *them* in fettle." Nat gave a dry chuckle at his joke and he and Ben put their heads together.

As Martin turned from Ben and Nat, thinking they had things to say that were for themselves, he saw Fleur standing with her father, and in the same instant she turned his way and they looked full into each other's eyes.

He knew that he grew suddenly pale and that, a second later, his face became suffused with blood and his eyes grew brighter and filled with joy. Because there was no doubting the look of sorrowful appeal, the questioning in her eyes. He wasn't conscious of moving to her but he found himself holding her hand and keeping it in his, of whispering something half incoherent, that told of his doubts and his waiting and his yearning. Her father had turned, too, and smiled and said crisply, "Hello, Martin. After a story?" as if this were not a moment set apart by time. Martin put his arm through hers as though they

were on a hilltop instead of on the edge of a Saddlebridge crowd that was doubtless observing him, and he walked her off out of the weaving-shed. He didn't know where he intended to go but they found themselves at the door of the boiler-house and went inside. The two boilers had rusted where paint was chipped or burnt off, a long bent shovel lay where it had been kicked, and ashes of reddish-brown and grey dribbled through the partly open boiler doors. He turned her slowly to him and then, with a swift movement, she came into his arms. "My dearest," he said. That was all. She was wearing a thick tweed coat, for the day was cold, but about her neck was a coloured silk scarf. Her face was pressed tight against his coat and he made no effort to seek her lips. He held his cheek against her hair and hat, holding her close and comforting her as one might a child, patting her back lightly and saying: "Oh, my dear, what a damn fool I've been." At that she gripped his left arm tighter and turned up her face. She was laughing at him tenderly now. And he stooped and kissed her open lips. He knew then she had been wanting him.

They sat down on two dirty, upturned buckets.

"O God, darling," he said, "I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't seen you soon. I think I should have died. I've been trying to hate you—and I've been loving you more and more."

She leaned forward with elbows on her knees and rested her cheeks on her fists, and turned her toes inwards. She had childish tricks of that sort that delighted him. He thought, "She looks about ten." She raised a serious face to him and said, solemnly: "You're terribly stiff-necked, Martin."

"I'm not," he said. "I try to be and it's always a

failure." He half wanted to ask about Nasmith yet shrank from mentioning his name. That business must be finished, he felt; she couldn't have looked at him as she had, otherwise. Nor could he have been so happy. He was inexpressibly glad; his heart was singing within him. It was as though the touch of her fingers had smoothed the lines from his face.

They walked back to watch the auctioneer. Ben and Nat had gone but Tom Armitage was there quizzically observing the scene and receiving a little homage from those who had begun to fear his mordant wit. Armitage found a measure of enjoyment in watching Saddlebridge tightening its belt. He said to Martin as they walked up the street. "I wonder how long it's going to be before they start growing corn again where some of the mills stand?"

"Bales of cloth for ploughshares, eh?"

"Far too many factories, Martin. Burn half of them down to-night and Lancashire might have a chance. Half the old men never learnt anything but what they picked up, and half the young 'uns care more about golf and motor cars and long week-ends than watching markets and getting out new designs." Armitage left them at the top of the street, with a light nod and a smile that was half satirical. Martin didn't like him overmuch—too cold and self-contained; too ready to laugh at himself and everybody else, too like a dentist probing about until he found a tender spot and made you jump. He imagined him observing them as test-tube specimens and speculating what the next stage of development would be.

They walked down the hill towards Burnham fighting a battle with the clanging trams on the fronts of which drivers blew whistles to urge sluggards off the shining rails.

"How's the job going?" yelled Martin.

"Fine," she said. "You know the woman who could make you weep by reading a railway guide? She's not in it."

"If you'd said reading a menu of your own cooking I'd have believed you," he cried. She didn't catch all of it even after he had put his lips to her ear but she laughed, knowing he was chaffing her and he laughed also. Smiles were on his lips all the way. He swung his stick and walked as if pine cones were about their feet instead of dirty, circling straw or as though the horizon was dotted with the sails of ships instead of tall chimneys and smoke blowing in the wind.

He commanded she should lunch with him. She said it was impossible, but he took no notice and marched her off to the Mitre. He felt like a conqueror. "For two pins," he said, "I'd run away with you right now—carry you off by force."

"Pooh!" she said. "Chance is a fine thing." But he knew that she was pleased at his impetuosity. Over lunch he kissed her hand when nobody was looking and when she said, "Martin, darling, don't," he said, "Another word and I'll kiss you on the lips for all the restaurant to see." He was enjoying himself enormously.

Suddenly he announced: "I'm going to write a play for you. There'll be a young fellow home from the war—frail, a poet, one leg three inches shorter than the other. He's madly in love with the girl he became engaged to during the war—a magnificent animal, lovely beyond words, selfish—that's you. The curtain will go up with him pirouetting to a gramophone—he can't dance any more, you see, with her, and she's breaking his heart by dancing with another swine who doesn't love her but desires her

and fascinates her. She's found that she can't stand making a martyr of herself for Philip—that's what I'll call him—although she hasn't yet admitted it to herself. Philip's father is a wealthy cotton-manufacturer but a damned fool who gambles away his fortune in the boom. The play ends in utter tragedy—Diana—that's you—having been seduced by the swine and left with a baby that fortunately dies, and Philip and his father sitting in the deserted manorial hall and Philip saying: 'If I hadn't been three inches short in the leg, Father, and you hadn't been a bit short in the head'. . . ." Frobisher drew a breath. "My God," he said, "what do you think of that all on the spur of the moment?"

"Fibber," she said, "you've been wangling that out for weeks."

"Honest to God," he said, "I haven't. Entirely due to your inspiration."

"Well," she said, "if all I inspire you to is cheap melodrama like that with a part for me that's a heartless beast, I don't seem to be exactly what the doctor prescribed for you, do I?"

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I daresay you would be very bad for me. But doesn't that apply to every woman with whom you are head over heels in love? How can you work if you are on fire? How can you be logical and careful and painstaking when all that matters to you is that at seven or eight in the evening you will hold her in your arms again?" He pondered gloomily and then looked at her with a radiant smile. "When we are married," he said, "you will have to leave me for stretches while I get on with my work."

"Anyway," she said, pouting her lips, "that smashes all ideas of your being unable to work without me."

"No, it doesn't. You are required to start the engine; then you are to vanish till that particular load is drawn to its destination."

Presently she asked: "Do you realize it was here we last talked—or rather you last spoke to me in your best autocratic manner?" He took a deep, sighing breath, and thought, "What's coming now?"

"I'm going to tell you about George Nasmith," she said. "I've never told anybody. It'll hurt you."

"All serene," he said, tightening his lips. "Fire away. I'm putting my spiritual tin hat on." He felt a little deadened; the moment of high emotion often left him cold; he felt more keenly later, as a man does badly wounded. She was saying: "I liked him a lot, you know, Martin. He was a good-looking man. . . ." She paused for a moment, uncertain how to go on. He said, contemptuously: "As if that mattered!"

She said sharply: "Of course it matters, Martin. Why shouldn't it? *You* wouldn't love an ugly woman—well. . . . He was good at games, easy-going—wealthy. Only—he lacked feeling, somehow. One night in our tram a woman got in with three children—all of them obviously under-fed. He whispered to me, 'Why do they have these brats?' When he said 'brats' I felt as if he had hit me in the face. I said to him when we got out 'I don't know how you can speak of children like that?' He laughed. 'Oh, those guttersnipes,' he said. 'Don't be silly. Almost human.' I left him there; I felt sick and furious. Next day I thought I'd been on edge too much perhaps; we made it up. Then, soon afterwards, we went up to Town to see the Guitrys. I was awfully keen on it. He said, 'Why not? We'll go up on the mid-day and back by the midnight—take a couple of sleepers.'" Her mouth drooped at the

corners. "It sounded great fun—I'd never had a sleeper. I loved the show. Coming back he came into my sleeper to chat and say good-night—and he wouldn't go away. Martin, it was awful." Her face was twisted like a child's. She went on: "In one of my parts I had to be the cynical spinster—fortyish—who says, 'I've been to Scotland for the grouse shooting scores of times and only once has my compartment failed to be solitary —and *then* he slept all the way.' I made people shriek with laughter. But with George Nasmith it wasn't funny. We almost struggled finally—he was a little tight—talked of everybody doing it these days—especially if they were practically engaged. Well, he went out at the finish. I never took my clothes off; just lay there feeling utterly sick and tired to death. He got me a taxi and said good-bye at the station. We knew it was the finish. I wanted to come and talk to you and I couldn't."

Her eyes were brimming with tears. Frobisher held her fingers on the seat between them. His heart was contracted in love for her. He murmured: "Darling, darling." He loved her more when she needed him in moments like this. He would never have believed when first he saw her she could have looked thus, with quivering lips and eyes with fear lurking there.

They drew closer together in the months that followed. He took her about "introducing her to Lancashire", as he called it. He felt she knew little of it, and, as for him, he was mightily proud of it. "They win or die who wear the Rose of Lancaster," he would say, with twinkling eyes. This county patriotism was against all his principles, but then he was an odd mixture. He was become a pacifist, or so he thought, yet he couldn't see a battleship launched without a tightening of the heart, and he couldn't en-

counter a regiment of men on the march without the blood leaping in his cheeks. They rode out from Linthorpe to where Sand-Hole colliery stood on Windip Hill. Here the corn in summer almost brushed the grey slag heap; here the sun glinted on the spinning wheel in the pit-head gear winding up the cages filled with coal or men; here the feathers of steam were blown away and the fussy little engines of green and brass pushed and nosed the lines of trucks about. On the pit-bank half a dozen pit-brow lasses were busy sorting the coal, their red cheeks grimed with coal dirt, exchanging coarse jests with the miners who went by. As Frobisher and Fleur stood on the bridge near by, a miner came past the girls—a tall, handsome man with flowing brown moustache and ruddy lips. His cap perched on the back of his head and he came laughing at a jog-trot till he reached a young woman wide in the hips and bosom.

"Heh! but Sarah, me lass," he said, "th'art a bonnie bitch, th'art an' all."

She playfully threw a piece of coal past his ear. "I've no intention o' having owt to do wi' thee," she said.

"Hey, but tha'll ha' some bonnie pups afore tha's done," he said turning his head.

"They'll not be thine anyroad," she called, throwing more coal and hitting him in the back.

"By crikey," he shouted; "tha'll ha' to come cocoa-nuttin' wi' me next Wakes."

Frobisher loved to hear the dialect. He often broke into it himself to plague Fleur who made but a poor show. "If tha' were owt a pound as an actress," he said, "tha'd be good at t' dialect. How dost expect to get on at thi job? I'm nobbut an amateur at it but I con whack thi yed off."

When he wanted to chaff her he would say: "Hey, but I'm proper daft about thee, lass, I am that."

"Tha'rt sure daft," she would say; "but I wouldn't be after sayin' it were becoss o' me."

"There you are," he would cry; "a mixture of Irish, Lancashire and Yorkshire! Wars of the Roses all over again."

He had friends among the miners to whom he could always go for the men's opinions when strikes were on. He found them often ugly, sensual, obsessed by betting, spending on dogs and pigeons money that should have gone on wives and children, but also warm-hearted, simple, hard-living and hard-playing men. One man in particular, David Spendlove, he had struck up a friendship with. David came of a mining family—his father was check-weighman and his two brothers worked down at the coal-face. David's career was a triumph over shyness and a stammer. At fourteen his voice was hardly heard in their house; he just pored over "penny-bloods", but later on, economics, Karl Marx, William Morris and treatises on mining occupied him. By the time he was eighteen he was dominating the local miner's lodge and had proved the most fiery speaker the Sand-hole pit had produced. He loathed speaking and even now only did so with difficulty but that very difficulty in framing words made him choose them with care. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles and lolled over their garden gate with his shirt-neck and waistcoat undone; he wouldn't as yet change his habits—he would wash to the waist but no lower, he would take brown bread and an apple for his snap, refuse to wear an overcoat on a bitter day and sit on his clogs at the end of the "fowt".

"Here's the future secretary for mines," said Martin with a laugh as he introduced Fleur.

"Na, na, none o' that," said Spendlove.

"You should come to the Little," said Fleur, admiring the miner's strong arms which rippled with muscles when he moved them.

"I do do," he said. "Why don't you put summat decent on? What's matter wi' Shakespeare or Peer Gynt? This fobbin' us off wi' a bit of a crook play or a bit o' James Barrie's no use."

Spendlove made no concessions when those he thought of as "fancy folk" spoke to him; rather he rushed the other way, became more bitter and argumentative if he suspected he were being exhibited. His mother called to him: "Why don't you put t' linnet out in t' sun—tha knows I like to 'ear God's Piccolo."

He winked at them and shouted back: "Aye, but why don't you let it go awtogether? Yo' owt to be locked up, Mother."

"So should somebody else I know," she said, putting her head out of the bedroom window and nodding to Frobisher.

"If yo' mean me," said Spendlove, "that's just what I am—I'm worse than a linnet—I go and come in a cage don't I, and t' pit's darker t'an our kitchen?" He went and hung the bird on a nail near the door.

Colliers were moving about the fields in their pointed, fancy-figured clogs, scarves knotted at their necks and their dark jackets hanging loose. Whippets in tight jackets like miniature horse-cloths trotted at their heels wearing polished, black leather muzzles to keep them from eating rubbish. " 'Ow do?" said the miners as they passed, and Frobisher answered, "How d'ye do?" They went by silently, chewing a sprig of hawthorn. Now and then the couple came across a pigeon-flyer who would stop at

a stile marked with a whitewash cross, undo his basket and take out a pigeon and arrange its wings. His companion would produce a large silver watch and the flyer holding the pigeon up, would wait till his friend said: "Six, five, four, three, two, one, Go!" whereupon the pigeon that had been jerking its head round the compass would take flight and after circling round two or three times, head off towards home.

"Why do these men attract me, Martin?" she would ask.

"Do they? Fine. They do me too—always have. I suppose there's some adventure about them—going deep into the earth—never quite knowing whether they'll come back—though I doubt if they give that much thought. I once heard an old strike-leader cry, pointing to flames leaping out of a foundry stack, 'There's blood mixed wi' them flames,' but somebody in the crowd shouted, "Ger-off, tha never sez!' and the menacing ring in the leader's shout became lost in derision—just as soldiers won't talk much about the war. The colliers seem to be much more of a community of their own than cotton operatives. Curious tales are told about them—terribly exaggerated I daresay—how they swop wives with one another, how they spend quids on racehorses when their kids are half-starving, and feed whippets on roast beef when they themselves have bread and dripping. They're the romantic, gipsy-folk of industry. Think of them taking canaries down the pit after an explosion to test the air, aye, and crying when the birds get done in, I'll bet." Occasionally in the evening they walked over toward the pit. Miners passed them like shadows going off for the night shift; golden lights winked about the pit-head, there was the hiss of steam, the subdued clang of metal. It reminded Frobisher of a ship—these engines of work that never

stopped moved his blood. "The war's done something for me," he thought. He couldn't help likening the dark contours of the countryside where villages shone in the hollows, where, down in Saddlebridge, a forge worked on with deep hoarse sighs as the steam-hammer rose and fell, and where strings of lights lay in curving lines on zig-zag roads, to scenes behind the lines in France when he had marched about in the dark, when tent flaps had winked as they opened and shut, when a cluster of lights marked the home of men, when ration-carts and gun limbers had rumbled in the distance, guns barked and crashed, and 'planes droned overhead. Those nights had lifted him above pettiness and hunger and discomfort as though he had tasted and smelt and savoured the essence of living; all his being had been marvellously content then. It was the same now. Questions of everyday life had gone; he felt as a god. He thought he had never been so happy. As they walked he would glance at Fleur's face, pale in the dark, her chin tilted up to the night. Sometimes he would pause and put his arm round her waist, hold her to him and kiss her lightly on the lips. He would see her smiling at him. Usually neither spoke. Then they would walk on, his slender hands holding her firmer ones. "Beloved," he would ask, "are you happy?" She would answer with a low laugh. "Yes, darling, are you?" "Terribly," he would reply in deep fervour. Sometimes as they walked and her hips moved against his, his head swam with desire of her and he would pause and hold her hungrily to him, his mouth buried in her throat and neck. Then the coolness of her lips would calm him and her voice asking him gently, "What is it, dear?" would soothe him and take the fever out of his veins. Once he said: "You are awfully calm," and she answered, "It's a good job one of us is

calm, isn't it?" There were times when he wondered how long he would be able to do without her, and he would say, with a wry smile: "If I don't marry you soon, I shan't have to see you any more." Then, a troubled look came over her face and her proud mouth drooped. He knew he was far more passionate than she, and needed her more; indeed, he often wondered if she wanted him at all. She wrote verses with depth and longing in them but he was never sure that they were written concerning him—he wasn't conceited or sure enough of himself for that—or that they were not a projection of her artist's soul, a longing for that she hadn't yet known, a "being in love with love", which until lately, he thought had been his own state of mind. The thought crossed his mind that he would go to Dublin and seek Molly again, but he rejected it. Deliberately to go in pursuit of her for the baser sort of love would be humiliating her. Besides, she had probably forgotten he existed, or would have lost whatever feeling she had for him. If his work took him to Dublin, then perhaps. . . . He would leave it to chance. There remained the courtesans. Yes, he thought of them also. He had seen them moving in and out and about the lounge of the Mitre, saucy, sure of themselves, over-painted a little. They had an impudence, a bold look, he rather admired. To stare the world in the eye, when you knew the world was censorious, to hold your own with policemen and hotel porters and underlings when they knew you well for what you were, to wipe the smirks off their faces with your challenging look—he saw that as an achievement. And to win men by your looks and the laugh on your lips and the sparkle in your eye when your pocket was well-nigh empty, and your feet were tired and your heart was sick—this, he thought, needed either

courage or no imagination. Like winning the V.C., maybe. They took a chance with every man—wretch, bully, ruffian, whoever he might be. He suspected he was sentimentalizing them somewhat, they probably had a crudity and ugliness he knew nothing of; no doubt their craft managed the affair with more polish in Vienna and Paris. But when one of them tossed her head at him at the door of the Mitre he was half-inclined more than once to take the challenge. He was very curious about them; they were pretty enough to make his heart beat fast. Then he thought of Fleur. No, it couldn't be done; not yet; it was too cold-blooded. But he thought, "There's no virtue in not going; it's been in my mind; I'm probably a coward, that's all. Mental adultery, somebody once said. Well. . . ." Next time he saw Fleur he would be humbler, more tender. He took her over Ben's spinning mill. He always thought cotton operatives were too gentle, too good-natured. They called them in the *Gazette* office, "The men who never strike". It wasn't strictly accurate, but it was significant. Frobisher found the throb of the engine, the rattle and whirr of machinery overwhelming. It did more than deafen you, it took life from you, pounded you, assaulted you. You smiled at your companion rather foolishly and sickeningly, he thought. This, perhaps, was what the machines were doing to those who served them day in, day out; the machines sucked their strength. Or perhaps you got used to it; perhaps you grew proud and exultant over these moving steel fingers and arms that did your bidding; he was aware some of the girls grew so careless of them that they hung up plays they wanted to learn at the loom corner and memorized them in the monotonous din. But as for him, he couldn't believe this incessant bedlam had no effect; it was like a

bombardment all day—the drum fire of peace. He said to Fleur: "You can't play Fanny in *Hindle Wakes* till you've been in these places, just as you'll never play a mother till you've borne children. The fashion experts in Paris say you can't be a good mannequin or, still less, a good designer till you've taken a lover—you don't know how to carry yourself or where to place the last touch of ribbon to best advantage. So, if you're going to act, you've to learn about life. In fact, you'd better be a reporter—see the bastardy summonses at the police court and the murder trials at the assizes—see men get drunk in pubs., come on the Stock Exchange and see men grow livid and fight and lose their veneer of cold, static indifference." She said: "Art isn't mere representation and copying. The true artist doesn't have to see everything before she knows or to feel every emotion she counterfeits. Too much feeling is a positive danger; you lose your head and your control of your audience." He knew she was right but he grumbled: "All right. Go on getting life from books and between the backs of plays and you'll get nowhere."

They walked through the spinning rooms where barefooted men trod the brown floors that glistened with oil. The men were too intent on their work, eyes glued to revolving long rows of bobbins, to notice them. Girls in the card-room, where fragments of raw cotton blew in the air like a dirty stage snow-storm, smiled in great friendliness. Fleur smiled back, her cheeks rosy with heat. She had the gift of being loved by waitresses, servants and those who worked for her and looked up to her. She commanded people easily. Frobisher was proud of her for it. He knew if she worked in the card-room the girls would worship her.

They lunched at Armitage's and Fleur went off to a dancing lesson, leaving the two men together. They sat over coffee, Frobisher watching Tom Armitage's cigarette drooping among his beard. The beard and moustache were stained yellow with nicotine and Frobisher wondered whether it was for that reason the hairs did not ignite. Armitage asked how the play was going. Frobisher, who set no great store by his writing and thought men who refused to discuss what they were engaged on, stupid and affected, said: "Well, I dunno. It's going on, you know. That's about all I can say. It was to be a tragedy and it shows signs of becoming a comedy. But I can't tell where it's going."

"Unfolding like a flower, eh?"

He didn't know if Armitage were sardonic, but he answered: "Meandering, rather. A brook that goes singing over the rocks and then dives underground—caverns and sullen pools one minute and bubbling in sunshine the next."

"That's sound enough, isn't it, sandwiching the comedy and tragedy—if you aren't self-conscious about it."

Frobisher said: "I had half thought I wouldn't write anything again that could be labelled one or the other; shouldn't a play be mixed, like life?"

"I don't quite see where the comedy in *King Lear* is coming from," Armitage said drily, "and I suppose you'd call that a play." He got up and walked about. "I'm weary", he said, "of the labour of writing. Why can't we put our fingers on the table and let the words run off the ends? Maybe they will, some day." He walked to and fro, his steel-rimmed pince-nez dangling on a cord and bounding lightly on and off his Norfolk jacket.

CHAPTER XVII

FROBISHER FINISHED his play that evening. It had taken him four weeks. He spent the next week or two in re-writing it and being alternately plunged into depression by it and made cheerful beyond reason. When rehearsals began, he asked old Charley what he thought of it. Charley said: "They'll tell you on Monday night, lad, whether it's any good." That wasn't very hopeful. Nor was Marshall the producer, with a secret scorn for any North-country play and an unerring finger for poor exits and entrances. "If I were writing a play," said Marshall heavily, sitting in an alpaca jacket with his feet on a littered roll-top desk, "I'd have my toy stage and my marionettes. And I think I would speak all the lines as I wrote them—see how they sounded."

"It might be still better", said Frobisher drily, "if you wrote your play in the conductor's seat in the orchestra with your stage littered with actors, who would put in their own bits—especially bits of business. That way, you could almost do without imagination at all."

Frobisher saw the first rehearsal and heard the play read. Young Heathcote was extremely blasé and occupied with the set of his Oxford trousers and the half yard of chain that ran from braces to pocket. In between he hugged Martha and did a bit of Charleston. Old Charley lost his glasses and was always late on his cue, Fleur read

tonelessly and flippantly to show she thought no more of this play than any other, and Martha mixed serious and beautiful reading with exclamatory Cockney and Irish. The remainder of them were tired, and yawned, and wondered in whispers where they would take the gin and It. before lunch. Frobisher felt deflated and sick and disappeared from his dark, lonely stall without a word during the third act. The stalls were shrouded in dark grey sheets and the stage looked dismal as a billiard saloon at nine in the morning. He felt himself an intruder and Fleur appeared a complete stranger.

"Enter the bleeding playwright, singing and dancing!" cried Grundy when Frobisher dropped into the reporters' room. "How's it going, Bud?" Frobisher said it was damned awful. "The thing doesn't belong to me any more, Guy. They've got it and they'll muck it about, and forget half of it and the bookmaker'll look like a Prohibitionist and there'll be a competition who can get most laughs and—oh, hell, come and have a drink!"

"Am I in that, laddie?" asked a high, thin voice from the corner.

"If you'll tell us how you broke the editor's heart," said Frobisher.

"I will that," said the thin-voiced man, getting up and holding the bowl of an enormous, hooked pipe. "Though, mind ye, I wasna awthigither responsible." John McWeir had been sacked from the reporters' staff, he said, for not bothering to write the story of how the Archbishop of Melbourne dropped dead in the Cathedral pulpit because McWeir knew he had a "scoop" and it was quite safe to leave the story out. His other story went like this: "When I wuz the Liverpool correspondent, I hadna sent a story for weeks and the editor said he simply had to hae yin.

So I gave him yin—a good yin—aboot a Blackburn weaver lassie who wuz going to the States to win a home for her consumptive spinner husband. I invented the whole thing—I did that. Made quite a stir, too. I gave no name, mind ye; a story's always safe if ye give no name. Weel, the editor said he must hae a name—must hae a name. So I gave him yin. And he wired to the New York fella to meet the wee lassie. Ho, didna I get the wind up! It was terrible, man. I couldna sleep. I was for the high jump a' richt. But would ye believe it, the New York fella interviewed her a' richt! He did that. *He* came frae Kirkintilloch, too."

They went down to the "Plough and Sickle" and drank mixed beer, McWeir wearing a big tweed cap and a raincoat and looking like an Irish gunman. "Why the blazes don't you go and write your Scottish novels on the banks of Loch Lomond?" asked Grundy, "instead of pestering our lives out in the office?"

"In the firrst place," said McWeir, "ye know very weel I'm no speller—never wuz, and I canna write unless now and then I can ask ye hoo to spell a worrd or two. And—" he leaned forward and waved his dribbling hooked mouthpiece in their faces, "I canna write a blessed word except at my old desk, with the throb o' the machines and the stink o' the ink and me imagining the copy boy'll be chasin' me for copy every brace o' shakes. That's when the real stuff is written, mind ye. One novel I got awfu' stuck over so one afternoon I took my stump o' pencil and I went and stood at the post office counter and asked for a batch o' press telegram forms and, be God, I finished the chapter off there and then on eighty-word sheets. I very nearly wired it to the *Times*, too. But I was telling you why I really got the sack——"

"Three more mixed beers," cried Frobisher. "Mac's getting under weigh."

"I wuz at the biggest fire there's ever been i' the village o' Westram," said McWeir. "Twa families were burrned to death, an' six horses an' three pigs. Ivery telephone wire wuz doon but the one I wuz usin' an' as I stood in the post office I could see the flames comin' creepin' nearer an' nearer. I wuz yellin' the story over to them at the top of my voice and just as I wuz gettin' to the part aboot six people bein' dead the telephone pole caught fire an' the flames leapt up and my solitary wire went doon. So naturally I went an' had a dhrink an' while I wuz doin' that my opponent got back to Toon on the fire engine an' got away with the story an edition before me. I told them mine wuz the real red-hot story with the very wires burrnin' as I dictated it, but I got no credit for that."

"I like the one best," said Grundy, "about the rail smash."

"Oh," said McWeir, "ye mean the absolutely true story of hoo I got the sack the last time of all? Aye, they kicked me doon the steps that time. There wuz a small menagerie involved in this fire and when I got there the guard was huntin' aboot the line with a lamp lookin' for snakes and men were chainin' tigers to crocodiles and flamingos wuz pickin' bits o' straw off monkeys' tails and the elephant wuz sittin' on the railway line and bendin' it all shapes. Oh, it wasna a sight ye see every day! Well, when I got through on the telephone to give 'em my story naturally I began, 'Snakes, tigers, flamingos and leopards. . . .' 'Just so, Mac,' sez Peter Baker at the other end, 'but let's hae the story. The edition'll be goin' doon in half an hour.' 'I'm givin' ye the story,' I sez. 'The railway smash story. Are ye ready? Here then:

Snakes, tigers, flamingos. . . .' 'Don't be a bloody foo',' sez Peter, 'didn't I tell ye we wuz pressed for time?' 'Fool yersel',' I sez, 'are ye takin' this story or not?' 'I'm takin' no story', he sez, 'from a damned Scot who's got delirium tremens.' 'Ye've got no more imagination than a louse,' I sez, 'there's a Noah's Ark mixed up i' this smash and there's monkeys, snakes. . . .' 'Aye, an' ladders too, no doot,' he sez. 'We'll tak' the story from the agencies and ye can come on agen when ye're sober.' As a matter o' fact, that wuz one o' the few occasions when liquor hadna passed my lips, but it's a dangerous thing to do your job too well. Sub-editors don't understand imagination, an' of course it was me the editor blamed instead o' Peter for not catchin' the edition; an' I got the sack."

"That was the best thing that ever happened to you, Mac, getting the sack. Otherwise you'd have been still reporting the police court," said Grundy.

"Aye," said McWeir. "Though I dunno it isn't a better job. This spinnin' yersel' oot like a spider spinnin' his web —no cop, laddie. When I hear the fire engine go by, I long to go dashin' after it. What's the good o' writin' a lot o' tripe about tuppenny ha'penny people who never lived when there's the history o' the whole worrld to be recorded every day? Fiction's a bastard business."

"Come off it," said Grundy. "Go and do my three columns of the town council this afternoon."

"I would," said McWeir, "but that's what I got the sack for—reportin' exactly what they said one week. The mayor looked such a bluidy foo' wi'oot an 'h' in his speech he threatened to sue us for libel and he withdrew his drapery advertisements. I tell ye, journalism should be scheduled as a dangerous trade."

Frobisher left them at it and walked across to the Mitre.

He thought Fleur might come in. The Town Hall bells were playing "Blue Bells of Scotland" with ponderous levity and slightly out of tune. Green tubs each containing an evergreen lent emphasis to the desert of stone about Queen Victoria's statue. A bale of cloth hurtling from a fourth storey window to fall with a thud on the lorry below missed him by a yard, and the horse tossed its nosebag so that a handful of chaff was blown to the winds and a piece entered Frobisher's eye. His eyes ran with tears, the unhurt one in sympathy with the wounded, and by the time he reached the Mitre his eyes were red and inflamed. He felt extremely foolish and thought of walking by, but Fleur and Martha appeared at that moment. He attempted dignity but his eye still ran water. He sniffed and had continually to dry his cheek. "I feel", he said, "like a man on his honeymoon who is sick aboard ship when his wife is standing it like an admiral. As a matter of fact, I'm weeping for mortification over the play."

"Well darling, I thought that was it," said Martha, "but I shouldn't have dreamed of mentioning it. Marshall says you ought to take the war out and cut that long speech of Charley's because the audience'll never stand it and Charley will go round and round in it like a cat chasing its tail and never get anywhere. And you don't really want me to come on the stage with that Pekinese in my arms, do you? It's sure to bite me."

"That's the idea," said Frobisher, trying to grin. "I hope you get hydrophobia. The only regret I have is that I didn't make it a bulldog." Fleur hardly spoke. They had both, he and she, been looking forward eagerly to rehearsals and now he sensed strain and disappointment. Martha attempted raillery and gossip, said "You both look as if you had lost a quid and found sixpence," and

announced she had an appointment with her dentist and must go. They both told her she was lying and that they weren't fit to be left alone and held her down by force when she tried to get up. That made them laugh and they felt better. Martha nevertheless did go, refusing coffee, and when she had gone, Frobisher felt contentment moving through his bones. "Am I making you miserable?" he asked, moving his hand across the tablecloth and touching hers for an instant.

"It's both of us, isn't it?" she said. "I simply don't know what it is. I'm not sleeping well, and I do so want the play to be a success, and I don't know whether I'm good enough for the part, and . . . oh well, you know."

"You're magnificent for the part," he said. "The play's not a millionth part worthy of you." They argued so, wistfulness in their eyes and an ache in their hearts. He knew what he wanted, and he wondered if she wanted it, too. He knew he was longing every hour to lie with her in his arms and be comforted. He said: "I feel sometimes I want to go to sleep with my head on your knee. I get so tired and dispirited."

"I think of us on a high hill," she said, "with nobody within miles, and only your voice in all the quietness."

"As long as you feel like that, I don't care a damn whether the play's hopeless or not. But it can't be hopeless with you in it." They laughed again and talked nonsense till it was time for him to go—how *she* would write a play and he would blossom out as a great tragedian. He was happy walking back to the office.

At the dress rehearsal, he sat with Marshall in the stalls, Marshall with an enormous book in which in the half dark he scribbled in a large hand. From time to time he wandered to the back and called out in a ghostly,

echoing voice: "You're masking her, Charley. No, no, you'll kill it if you take it so slowly. A moment of feeling there—almost a hush. Yes, again, please."

Frobisher began to admire Marshall. He suspected Marshall knew more about the play than he did himself. Marshall had turned it into a piece of mechanism wherein the figures crossed one another on definite speeches, came in and out in studied manners, mixed laughs and sighs and gestures and turns of the head and glances out of the window or looks at pictures with what they had to say. A lift of the brows, a sideways glance, an inflection of voice —these lent point. The play was darkened here and plunged into light there. And Marshall was still hard at it. "That fireplace must come downstairs. It is chasing everybody up-stage, and we've enough people up-stage in this company already"—permitting himself a joke. "Tom, you must have the chloroform ready on the handkerchief, and Connie, if you *must* have the knitting on the couch, shift it to one side or he'll sit on it. And I defy anybody to be calm when transfixed with knitting. . . . Yes, and Hubert, take her arm a little earlier. And Fleur, I want you to smile at him more. Not as if you were eloping, though. I think we want another line there. 'Let's go,' would do. May we have that, Mr. Frobisher? Thank you. Put that line in the prompt copy, somebody. Now we'll try that again." Marshall sank down beside Frobisher murmuring in the depths of his overcoat: "Oh, this repertory will drive me mad," but almost before he had finished the sentence he was up on his feet walking swiftly from one corner of the stalls to the other. "Jim! Jim! Where's Jim? Lights! LIGHTS!" Cries for Jim! and lights! rang round the stage as cries for a witness echo in and about a police court. And presently Jim, deaf,

portly, with a dirty white apron wound in a string round his waist, and with a bowler on the back of his head, wandered solemnly on to the stage, and came to the footlights, hand behind his ear turned to the stalls and eyes screwed up to stare into the darkness.

"Lights, Jim. Too green. You make me expect Hamlet's ghost any moment."

"Thought you said you was doin' the verandah scene—early mornin', sir?"

"No, Jim, I said this was where Mirandah wears that dress like sunlight—MIRANDAH—the heroine."

"Yes, sir? Any birds singin', sir?"

Charley said "Not *singing*, Jim," and gave him a dig in the ribs to help him off-stage. Jim said heavily, without a smile, "I understand. Mornin' but no birds." And added as he moved into the wings, "Come on, now, 'Arold. Us isn't on us 'olidays."

The play went on to the end of the act. Young Heathcote had to kiss Fleur and embrace her passionately, and Marshall, declaring it lacked sincerity, made them do it again and again. Frobisher could see Fleur was growing more and more wooden and he was secretly delighted. He fidgeted in his seat and wanted to tell Marshall to let it go, but struggled to preserve indifference. He lit his pipe and had a word with Charley who had stolen into the stalls in his make-up and looked as if he had walked out of a "Hospital Saturday" procession in his paint and loud check suit and stage jewellery from Woolworth's.

"You're not thinking of cutting that long speech?" asked Charley tentatively. "No—I didn't think you would. It's a good speech."

"What there is of it, eh Charley?" asked Martha, joining them.

"Sh! Sh!" said Marshall turning round.

"All right, Pa," said Martha to her shoes, smoothing her dress.

"It's like a kids' school, in some ways," thought Frobisher. "All of them light-minded and irresponsible—paint and make-believe and fancy-dress. If I'd my time over again I'd be in at it—scene-shifting, most likely." Heathcote was holding Fleur in his arms. She was leaning back limply and he was one moment gazing with feigned adoration in her eyes and the next looking up towards Marshall waiting for comment. It looked inexpressibly comic to Frobisher. He thought, "He'll drop her in a minute. His arms must be aching like hell," for she was making no effort to hold herself up.

"Fleur is fed up with this," muttered Charley. "She'll do no good with it; Marshall might as well let 'em get on. I know her. But, bless you, she'll be all right on the night." Marshall apparently came to that conclusion for he suddenly said: "All right, all right," loudly, and briskly. "Next act, please."

They had a break for lunch—twenty minutes—and sent out to Richardson's café across the square for sandwiches and tea and Eccles cakes, and ginger beer, and sat in the stalls among the crumbs. No one had known whether the rehearsal would be over by lunch-time. Nobody bothered. Everything was higgledy-piggledy. They giggled and gossiped, and spilt ginger-beer over the red plush seats and Marshall said they would have to pay for damage, to which Martha rejoined hoity-toity: "Damage? What about the damage these corsets are doing? I do declare, Mr. Frobisher, I've as many curves as the mayor and corporation put together."

"Well, as long as they're in the right places," said

Charley, who was thereupon pushed off his seat on to the floor and was so fat and tightly wedged in that Fleur and Frobisher had to struggle to pull him up. "By gum, lad," he said, "I'm that blown out I shall pop any minute."

Frobisher was thinking, "I thought my job wasn't much like work, but this beats it." He said as much to Charley. Charley replied: "It's good while it lasts. The curse of it is there's not enough work. Half the profession is resting —otherwise starving. Ten weeks in and twenty out—that's the style." Marshall coming up, said: "My last year in London I made two hundred and fifty pounds—and I was doing well. Had to go about in taxis and be a member of two or three clubs. And a dramatist wrote a part specially for me. My notices were immense, as the chorus ladies say."

"Life's one long crisis," said Martha. "I've got four pounds ten in the post office savings bank and that's the most I've had for five years. But we always say we're doing marvellous—got lovely star parts and Cochran's after us. We always scream at the top of our voices because we've got so little to shout about."

Frobisher said when they had all left him but Fleur: "They've got gaiety and pluck and they're simple and generous. They whack their money if need be like all really poor people. They're so near the edge of the cliff that it doesn't worry them too much to look into the chasm."

"You ought to hear Charley's tales about walking round the agents' offices in London," said Fleur, "lunching on a penny roll at Lyons', spitting on your cracked boots and polishing 'em on your stockings, and roaming like tigers round the streets off Leicester Square and saying to everybody you meet, 'I've got an appointment this

afternoon at four,' and pulling an old envelope half an inch out of your pocket to prove your lying words are true. Charley says it's hell and half the people you go to see treat you like cattle. 'Nothing for your type to-day, miss.'"

Frobisher said: "You'll never go to London then, darling?" She turned and flashed a smile at him and said, like a chorus-girl: "You bet your life I will, as sure as you'll have six brass handles round you one day."

"O.K.," he said, "I reckon I shall park my traps there too one day. We'll have a flat."

"Two flats," she said laughing, "but not too far away."

He glanced sideways at her eyelashes, stiff and loaded at the tips with black paint, her vivid crimson lips, the rouge high on her cheek bones, her eyelids lightly blued, her nails pinked and highly polished, her hands and arms washed with white, and thought: "If she wasn't Fleur I'd say she looked like a courtesan. Women painted before the Flood. This painted mask is almost hideous. Perhaps it's as well. Keeps the kisses and embraces from being too passionate or anyway, too sincere. I wonder if it does? When we're married and I'm making a hundred pounds a week I'll make her chuck the stage. And then, maybe, I'll get bored stiff with her. I suppose half the reason I'm in love with her is that she's gifted and people admire her."

She said: "Heathcote's the last person I enjoy playing opposite to. Doesn't help in the least. I think he hates me. He's like a block of wood."

"Fine," he said. "How do you think *I* feel sitting here listening to him make all the speeches to you I wrote with my heart's blood. Wot O!"

"I don't believe you care a damn," she said.

"It's a funny thing," he said, "but that's perfectly true.

I don't—not when you're acting. I'm so much of an artist that over the footlights you cease to be the woman I'm going to marry——"

"PER-haps," she said.

"You're nothing but a bit of painted cardboard in a play. I could see you murdered or raped with indifference."

"Thank you," she said, "I will now go and do my little piece."

"Let it be *my* piece," he said. "Not Frobisher diluted with Armitage and punctuated by the prompter."

Shafts of October sunlight dazzled their eyes as they walked down Linthorpe road. It was half-past three. They took a tram and rode out to Thornhill Wood. The brick-red rows of houses with doorsteps and gateposts and small squares of flagged pavement, all stoned yellow, climbed the hill aimlessly and stopped abruptly. Down the hillside straggled a medley of hen- and pigeon-cotes, built of odd pieces of wood—rectangles, squares, rhomboids, sloping roofs, straight roofs, felt roofs, corrugated roofs—more ill-assorted than a men's bivouac and far more broken and disreputable. "Making-things-do gone mad," he said. "Democratic freedom in full swing. Keep hens in back yards and turn them into egg-laying machines scratching and jumping like acrobats in a few square yards and fill your spare bedroom with singing birds, trained with water rollers like operatic prima donnas. What the hell *is* this passion for shutting things up—men and women in tiny box houses, and animals in zoos? I'd like to shoot all promoters of zoos."

"Don't go off the deep end," she said. "I daresay they're much better off—they get their meals and they're warm and they don't get eaten by some other animal. They're safe."

"Safe? Who the blazes wants to be safe? Where there's safety people perish. That's women all over. Safety, keep what you've got."

"To go on pitying people because they live in rows is piffle," she said. "If you've never had a thing, you don't miss it. The father of Bertha, our maid, is a collier. She says he's happier down the pit than up—makes a fuss of the ponies and tames the mice—one he calls Wagtail comes and eats crumbs off his hand. When they give him brown bread for his 'snap', he says, ' 'Ere, this won't do for our Wagtail. 'E doesn't like brown bread.' When they go on holiday to the seaside he gets up at half-past five in the morning and they've a hard job to make him stop there a week."

"You're a damned hard-hearted realist," he said.

"Women have to be," she answered.

His voice was gruff but he couldn't help admiring her. He knew now that whatever she did, he would think it right; whatever she said he would smile at and forgive. He wished sometimes that she had some ailment, that she was less handsome, or that she would get into a scrape, so that there might be some merit in loving her. As it was, he couldn't understand why *everybody* wasn't in love with her.

They walked through the wood. Its quietness subdued them and left them silent. The ground was strewn lightly with brown and gold and bronze and thin beams of sunlight fell slanting half way down the tree trunks and the tree tops were bathed in mellow light. On the far edge they stopped and looked down into Linthorpe.

"No wonder gods live high up," she said. "I always feel mighty superior up here. Who is it says we're just various sorts of ants—those ants with bits of straw round

their middles won't speak to those ants without. Comic."

"Gives me a funny feeling in the stomach," he said. "Look down on that—schools, pubs, foundries, mansions, wash-houses, town halls, churches, convents, cinemas—all filled with Toms, Dicks, Harrys, Gertrudes, Betsys and Janes, the virtuous, the drunk, the liars, the skunks, the proud, the lowly—and multiply that place a millionfold and then several millionfold more, and ask yourself how God or any other Deity can keep watch and ward over little Lizzie Turnbull who broke her doll to-day and who took a downward step by saying it was done by Winnie Bradford who lives next door. How can anybody be conceited enough to suppose he matters?"

"You matter to the people you live among," she said. "And perhaps that's all that counts. You've no right to make other people unhappy, you've no right to give them anything but a square deal. As for preparing yourself for a future life—it's a poor business doing the right action to qualify yourself for a prize, isn't it?"

They started to walk downhill. A church bell began to crash peals that broke over the countryside in clangorous echoes. "Those bells," he said, "I love them and hate 'em. They wake something superstitious in me—make me as a child in the dark. If some damned priest with his robes and crozier and incense came by, I should feel a quiver of awe and respect—and loathe myself for it. All these vestments, and rituals, and stained windows and the scent of lilies should be prohibited by law."

She said quietly: "You're very cranky to-day, Martin. What is it?"

"I don't know. I oughtn't to be. I'm with you and I'm never less than content when that happens." He spoke simply. "Only—there are so many parts of me that

I'm fed up with. I despair so easily. I go on coming the same croppers, indulging mentally in vices, being easy-going when I know I oughtn't to be. And every time I slip up in my own estimation leaves a small stain. I see men whose face muscles have sagged and wasted and whose eyes don't hold one's own with courage any more, and I think, 'Maybe, some day, I'll be like that.' You remember the beachcombers in the South Sea Island plays? I'm a faint imitation of one." The afternoon had grown colder and her face when he looked at it had lost some of its colour, and the old troubled, wistful glance was back in her eyes when she turned to him. "Don't take any notice of me," he said, "I'm blowing off steam. Perhaps I'm no worse than most, but I'm pretty sure I'm no better."

"Don't play cat and mouse, Martin," she said. "If there's something you think I ought to know, tell me."

"There isn't, darling," he said. "Only I realize I'm capable of sinking pretty low, I think; low by high standards, anyway. When I go to Assizes and see men charged with bigamy I'm always certain I could become a bigamist. After all, what is there in it except that they've failed or forgotten or couldn't afford to divorce the first wife. And men summoned under bastardy orders—that's a matter of bad luck, isn't it?—a poor man's mistress bears a child neither of them wants. And embezzlement —why, nearly every newspaper reporter makes a profit on his expenses. As for the petty deceits of life—the misrepresentations, the procuring information by bribery, the permitting a man to tell us a story that gives him away when he doesn't realize he's making a damned fool of himself—God help us, we do that often enough."

"Yours sounds a low job to me," she said, tilting her chin up.

"Damned low," he said, "but damned fine in many ways. Compared with politics and commerce it's clean and magnificent. We jump on people with both feet when they deserve it and we encourage the arts. Who was it told the world *you* had a trickle of talent? Your most obedient. And about this talent—I knew there was something else I wanted to say."

"I hate people who talk too much," she said, laughing at him.

"You've a cinema mind," he said. "The fundamental tragedy of life is that one has no control over one's character—or damned little. You are passionate or cold, generous or mean, brave or timid, virtuous or a scoundrel, brainy or an idiot, according as you were born. All damned fine talking about controlling your destiny, and forming your own character, and resisting temptation—bosh. You can fight with yourself like the devil but if you're a physical coward you won't win the V.C. and alternatively if you've no nerves and no imagination you won't be scared stiff if the world erupts. If you're oversexed you'll pursue women and——"

"By this argument you could forgive yourself anything," she broke in coldly. "It's decadent, losing grip."

"You're no more responsible for your character," he said, "than you are for your voice and your face."

"You make your face and your voice, too," she said, "by the life you live. Go on the loose and do shabby tricks and grow ashamed and contemptuous of yourself, and see what your face is like in the glass."

"All right, Jehovah," he said. "My armour's smashed in. Nevertheless, you're made of equal parts of steel and

concrete and till you soften down a bit, you'll never be an actress. All the same, I'm afraid I adore you." He lifted her hand as they walked and kissed it. "You'll rule me with a rod of iron I expect and I shall be the most hen-pecked man in Burnham."

"Within a week," she said, "we should be throwing the furniture at one another."

She always spoke like that when he talked of their being married; she treated it with raillery and faint scorn as if he were a schoolboy longing for the moon. Partly, he felt, it was because of her modesty, her instinctive turning of the complimentary shaft aside. But sometimes she would say, with determination: "I shall never marry, and you shouldn't either. We're both far too impressionable; there'd be rocks all over the place."

He had a meal alone at the Mitre on his way to the theatre, but he couldn't eat. He drank a little wine. The day had been upsetting. He and Grundy had been rushed off early in the afternoon on a railway disaster. Grundy, in his sporting way, had said: "Don't you come. I'll manage it. Push off back from the station. Damn it, Bristow oughtn't to have sent you. Knows it's your first night." Frobisher said: "Maybe I'm better out of the first night, and anyway, Bristow's quite right. The paper comes first. Plays don't make cigarette-paper money." But he was feeling sick with disappointment, all the same, anxious too, about the work ahead—he imagined a score dead and a hundred injured, distressing scenes, officials and police obstructing them, no telephone for miles. However, the smash was comparatively trifling—driver and fireman killed and six people injured. He was back in the office by five o'clock, Grundy having stayed on to

clear up the odds and ends of the story. He changed his clothes at the office, feeling ostentatious when sub-editors popped in and out and said: "Hello, you eating a free dinner to-night? Bring me a cigar back." Others who knew what was ahead said: "Good luck, Frobisher—if there's a riot we'll have a bill on it." He said: "I'm putting my tin hat on in case they throw things."

He gulped down some more wine—it was sour in his mouth and caused him to twist his lips—and paid the bill. He stood for a few moments at the corner of the square looking at the dirty yellow front of the theatre and at his name in black and red on the posters that announced "The Two Brothers", a play in three acts. Few people were about; forty minutes yet before the curtain went up. He felt elated—a little cocky. An elderly man with a grey beard brushed his elbow as he passed and went through the swing doors to the box-office. Frobisher experienced a small thrill. A quiver played about the bottom of his spine. He thought, "By God, you bump into me and you little know who I am. You wait." A chill succeeded that. Surely there ought to be more people about. The theatre would be empty. The play would be a wash-out. He remembered now that nobody had expressed any enthusiasm about it; Marshall had worked as with a stern sense of duty. It would have been better had the railway smash been terrible—he could have rung up after the show—"Hello, Marshall? You've survived then?" And Marshall, "Went terrific—ten curtains—everybody howling for you." He grinned to himself. Some hopes, as young Harrop used to say. Oh, well, no use sweating tin hats.

He went in at the stage-door. Joe popped his head out from his little box studded with hooks for keys, and furnished with alphabetical date rack, telephone, and blow-

pipe, and said: "Lett-ers for you, sir." One was from Fleur, two others with halfpenny stamps—clipping agencies seeking orders. Fleur had written: "Martin dear, you know what I wish you. If I play well, it will be for you. Come in and see me for a moment if you've time. My love." He grinned; that was fine. Joe, who had lost a leg at Passchendaele, said: "Keep yer 'eart up, sir. Ain't a bad litt-el show from wot I 'ear. Ole Jim quite likes it, an' e's a good judge, is Jim."

"Thanks, Joe. I hope you'll get round to see it."

"No, sir, not me. Ain't seen a show for years. Read the scrip sometimes—that's enough for me." But Frobisher didn't know whether that was meant to be damning or not. "In any case," added Joe as he moved off, "I'll wait a bit, see? By Thursday they'll be doin' it pretty good." A whistle sounded on the blow-pipe, and he heard Joe answer. "Yes, sir, 'e's just come in. Yes, sir, toot sweet." Joe leaned over his waist-high door. "Mr. Frobisher! Mr. Marshall's askin' fer you. Very important he sez. Sounds a bit excited, like."

He met Marshall on the stone stairs, voluble, beginning sentences that never finished, gesticulating. "No use, Martin," he said, "we're done. No Heathcote. No lover. Bloody fool. Won't wear a hat—you know the sort. Chill two days ago. Flu. 103 this morning. Saw him an hour ago. Been trying to get you ever since. Swore he was going to play or die. Idiot. Had to tell him even if he came wouldn't let him play. Young Turner who might have done it, ill all week, too. Never read a word, or seen a rehearsal. Lord God, did you ever? What *are* we to do? Postpone—get somebody to read the part? I'd read it myself, only——"

"Postpone be damned," said Frobisher. He felt angry,

irritated. "We must find some other way," he said. He followed Marshall up to his room—a tiny place, desk littered with correspondence, play manuscripts, pictures of actresses seeking jobs, coy women, bold women, women draped in shawls tight over their provocative bosoms, women in "character"—riding-whips, big teeth; skimpy charwomen; pictures on postcards stamped with poverty and shouting, "I am at my wit's end"; pictures, elaborate, worth a guinea each, bought by fond mothers. Marshall pushed one or two aside and sat himself among the rest. "It means reading the part," he said. "Can you see it? Somebody stumbling about, crossing at the wrong times, book in front of his nose. Ghastly!"

Frobisher said: "I'll play it myself."

By this time he was stiff, strung up. He hadn't really known he would make this declaration. Blood filled his head, it seemed to him, far too tightly. He was charged with energy he couldn't altogether control. He had been angry at this trick of chance that looked like damning the evening, angry at these casual theatre folk (he knew that was faintly unjust but never mind), but when the idea leapt into his mind that he himself might play, might make love to Fleur for a thousand eyes to see, emotion ran up into his throat and his face felt for a moment hot and flaming. "I'll play it myself," he said. He was imperious, his lips stuck out, his face sullen.

Marshall said: "O God, I don't know. You don't act—can you remember the lines—your clothes——"

Martha knocked and put her head in. "Wilfred," she almost shouted, "what are we going to do? Martin, love, what a shame? Your first night." Her eyes were blazing and troubled at the same time.

Frobisher suddenly grinned. "Don't worrit, lass," he

said; "I'm goin' to be t' lover to-night, aye, I am an' all." He had to clown and be foolish. When things got to their worst, you might as well laugh. It had worked well in France, and, anyway, he was built that way; worried to death over small mishaps; calm—or was it stolid, stupid —in the crisis.

Martha cried, with shining eyes, "You never are!" meaning "Of course you are" and threw her arms round him and kissed his cheek. "We'll pull you through," she said, "and, hey, what an advert. for you? I 'spect you did it o' purpose." She flung out gaily, leaving them both smiling.

"Bobbydazzler's the word for Martha," he said.

Marshall, the decision taken, moved swiftly. "Dress with Charley," he said. "I'll get Thomson to make you up. No time for anything in the programme, of course. I'll make an announcement before the curtain. The girls'll help you—fine lot—usually know the men's parts. You're not on till end of first act—give time to send a cab for your clothes." He raced out, and went down the stairs sideways, crying: "Thomson! Want you to make up——" though he must have known Thomson was fussing about the stage.

When Frobisher knocked on Fleur's door, Martha opened it and walked straight out, giving him a swift, brief smile. He found himself looking at Fleur who had risen. She was wrinkling her brows a little quizzically, but there was humour and pride and love in her eyes. She held out her hands and he took them and walked forward till his arms were about her, his fingers feeling the prickly tinsel and the warmth of her body. When he released her, her eyes were wet. "Don't ask me why," she said. "Stupid, but I can't help it. Damn, you've spoilt

all my make-up, darling." She began busily to mould her lips again and the corners of her eyes. He stared at himself in the glass; his coat was smeared with powder, his mouth smudged. He wiped his lips.

She said: "I knew this would happen."

"Rot," he said. He was gruff, the moment of intense feeling gone.

"I'm psychic. Always told you I was. Felt queer all day."

"Wind up," he said, "that's all."

"Pooh!" she said, "it's not *our* first night, you know. *We* have one every other Monday."

"You've never had one like this is going to be," he said insolently. She laughed at him, but she believed him. "I believe you're right," she said.

"By heavens," he said, "it'll never happen again." He was oblivious of the banality of what he said. He was thinking: "We're both young—we're in love—anyway, I love her enough for both of us. And we're going to do a piece of work together—she's going to speak my words; and, maybe, people are going to laugh and cry about it—happen!" A dry smile curved his lips. Happen! He couldn't take himself quite seriously.

She said: "Heavens, you're not made up! Hurry! And listen, when you're making those love speeches—they've got to hear at the back. Don't worry about me—I know them already. And when in doubt, over-act a bit. The audience won't expect you to be any good. Understudies always gets lots of sympathy."

"Damn cheek," he said.

He thought: "My God, I'm too happy to live."

She said: "I expect you bribed Heathcote, or doped him or achieved some other gorgeous bit of wangling."

He said: "I didn't, but I would have done, if I'd thought of it."

He brushed her neck with his lips and went.

Charley was getting into a collar yellow at the edges with grease paint, and soiled to a degree. "Well, Martin," he said, "this is all we wanted to make it a real 'do'. I once played with an author before; he was so lost in admiring what he'd given us to say that he missed every cue, and bless your life, he hardly knew a damn word." Charley seemed rather pleased at that.

"What I call being cheerful," Frobisher said. He wondered if Charley disliked the thought of his playing—this invasion of "the profession". Thomson, a heavy-jowled, fat, pale, humourless man who played policemen and butlers, and had never forgiven the fate that sent him from Brixton to earn his living in the provinces, made him up quite casually. "Two coats I think, Charley?" he said. "Nice groundwork of something pale and work up to the bronzed hero." He sucked his teeth and suggested Frobisher should strip down to singlet and trousers. Frobisher sat in a chair and felt as powerless as in a barber's chair. Suddenly he was meek and depressed; he knew so little. He had acted once or twice with amateurs—parts of an old Scotsman, a middle-aged man-about-town; child's play. He found himself considering passages in the play and concluding that parts of it were dreadful. Should he make a desperate appeal to Marshall to permit him to cut pieces out, to re-write others? Nonsense; this was panicking; contemptible. A pity you couldn't prevent yourself from acting contemptibly in your own eyes. He felt as a rabbit frozen by fear of a stoat; he had once seen one. The rabbit sat there and the stoat took its time moving in concentric circles that narrowed and narrowed. He had

thrown a clod of earth and scattered them both. He thought: "I suppose I never really anticipated the play would be produced, or I'd have taken more care." His old fault, losing interest too soon. He got an idea and it set him on fire but before it was carried out to the hundredth per cent, his regard for it was gone; just as his handwriting at the beginning of a letter was good and before the end, execrable. People could never read half he wrote—unless it was copy for the newspaper, when he had to take care. Even then they complained or pulled his leg. They said: "There's only one comp. can read old Frobisher's hand, and when he's got a night off Frobisher might as well be off, too." He couldn't always read his writing himself a week later, a fact which frightened him sometimes and made him wonder if he were a little mad.

When his face was painted, he felt more at ease. This coloured disguise made him less vulnerable; he was no longer Frobisher, no longer entirely responsible for what this painted man did; a foolish pretence, doubtless, but it served. Thus had he sheltered from shells beneath a piece of corrugated iron and felt secure.

The play had begun when he reached the wings. He was glad of that. There are authors who cannot bear to be in the theatre, who are so tortured that they walk round the square outside till the play is over, snatch a few hurried words with the producer and sit up all night drinking coffee until the morning papers pronounce the verdict; an exhausting and cruel business. (A special author's edition should be available at 1 a.m., he thought.) But Frobisher was not of these. Nor yet could he preen himself in the stalls, and laugh with gusto at his own jokes, look with disdain at the cheaper seats and think, "This is my brief hour." "I am up like the May Fly," he would

say to Ben, "but the May Fly lasts longer." The first time a curtain-raiser of his had been put on, he had roamed the theatre like a tiger, stalls to circle, circle to "gods", "gods" to wings and back again. Fully a mile he had covered in the twenty minutes it lasted—he had got to the gallery before the first laugh came—he thought they would never laugh. He wanted to shout: "Laugh, damn it, it's a comedy, comedy, COMEDY!"

So being in the cast had its points.

"How are you feeling?" asked Martha. "They seem to like it." She was a buxom woman now, a large satin bow beneath her chin, bosom swelling and cheeks rosy. She stood with her head cocked, listening to the progress of the dialogue, spoke in something more than a whisper and less than a voice, and had the excitement of a first night in her bright eyes. "I feel about seven," he said, putting his head on her artificial bosom. "You're a darling, Martha."

"Sh!" she said, a finger to her lips.

"I shall call my steam-yacht 'Martha'," he said, with his lips to her ear; "and she shall be dressed with flags every time you come aboard, and. . . . O hell, I feel as if I could be sick."

"Sorry, ducky, but there's no time to be sick till the show's over—or we'd all be busy being sick." She took his hand, which was moist, in her dry one and rubbed his palm on her sleeve. "Don't have any whisky", she said, "till it's over; makes you worse." Marshall appeared with rumpled hair. He spoke, but more with eyebrows and hands than voice. "Know your cue? Good. Take it easy —they liked it when I said you were to play." He went, full of gestures.

"Now," said Martha, opening the flimsy door for him.

He stepped on to the stage, dimly aware of the pale faces in the blue-blackness to his left, like lilies putting up their faces in a garden at night. Fleur rose to welcome him. It seemed so natural that he murmured softly, "Hello, darling." It wasn't in the play but it was lost in a flutter of claps over the house. Blood was pounding in his head and his mouth was dry, but he spoke without tremor—more slowly and heavily than his wont. That soon passed though, and presently he trod, and moved and spoke with enormous confidence and delight. These hundreds of eyes inspired him, lifted him up. Once Fleur murmured to him as they embraced, "Don't be so up-stage, darling; don't swank so." But he only laughed. Once, too, he forgot his words and waited patiently for the prompt. It came, faint and inaudible. He inclined his head and said something between "Eh?" and a polite grunt. The stalls burst into laughter. He found he had the gift of humour, of being slightly comic, and raising laughter readily. He played up to it. He thought, "This is the real stuff; I was made for this job." When he came off, flushed and triumphant, Martha said: "Well, love, you 'got over' all right but you're not a damn bit like the part." Marshall was severe. "You'll spoil the play if you go on like this." But Frobisher couldn't be crushed. He said: "It's my play, isn't it?" He went up to change his clothes. Charley was silent and as Frobisher got into his evening jacket the fever left him and he felt sick again. Marshall was perfectly right; the audience wouldn't know what to make of him. He should have been romantic, trembling with love, and speaking with halts and hesitances in the presence of her he worshipped; and he had stalked about like a prince. He thought: "It would have been better if I'd been frightened to death."

Fleur was critical but generous. "Don't worry, darling," she said. "I knew there'd be no half way with you. You're always either God Almighty or a miserable sinner. Only, for heaven's sake *think* your words before you speak them—don't hurl love at me as if you were addressing the St. John's Hall and had it off by heart."

The second act was better. He had diluted his style, and anyway there was a party scene and he could afford to let himself go. He had to slip on an artist's béret and smock and sing something about:

I'm a cubist, futurist, I'm extremely *au fait*
With the trend of the modernist school,
My flat is in Chelsea and I can quite well say
I know every species of fool,
Who paints you a lady disrobed for the dance
But swears that it's merely a sunset in France.

Between the verses he popped round the circle and painted moons of vermilion on the girls' cheeks. Martha had to get rather tight and sing a ditty about:

I'm a beautiful belle from the musical stage, though I own I
am rather outsize,
I am loved by the younger poor son of a peer—an affair for
me rather unwise,
I can open bazaars in a manner superb, I can ski, and I ride
in the Row,
And at fixing Press pictures with Viscounts and Earls,
There's not a damned thing I don't know.
I'm a tragedy queen; with an old soup tureen, I can put up a
show at high art,
In a thriller by Wallace or bits cribbed from Horace, I am
equally clever and smart,
I am Lady Macbeth to the life so they say, Joan of Arc has
got nothing on me,
Œdipus Rex or a murder 'tween decks, I can fix between
luncheon and tea.

Martha, he thought, was magnificent. As for Fleur, he enjoyed the way she poked fun at him, the small encouragements she gave him from her eyes, the turn of her head, the light in her face when he came on. He wanted to shout with Masefield "I am a coin for you; spend me as you will." He was thinking, "I wonder if the audience know? I hope they do. They must, they must." He wasn't nervous till the curtain had rung down. When it went up, he stood there in the midst of the company, shaky and conscious that he must be rather white under the paint. "Speech!" they cried. He moved half a pace forward. "I feel I have been thrust on you—trying your patience," he said. "It is my friends who've pulled me through." He was spent. He looked to right and left—at Fleur, and Martha and Charley and his voice almost broke. He stepped back and waited unmoving, with head staring at the floor till the last curtain was taken. He was feeling a fool. "Why do I behave like this? My nerves must be rotten. Too damned silly."

Fleur walked with him up the stairs. At her door he took her hand and kissed it. "Dearest," he said. He looked at her with every fibre in his body aching for her. He spoke with lips hardly moving and voice hardly to be heard: "I can't wait much longer for you, my love," he said. He shook his head deprecatingly. "It's no use talking to me. I'm not like other people. I feel sometimes I shall die if I don't have you."

Her eyes were troubled, but she didn't speak.

Ben and Susan and Tom and Mary Armitage were waiting by the time he was dressed. He had drunk some raw whisky and was recovered. But he didn't want to go home. He found Martha. "Martha," he said, "Fleur and I want to come and have supper with you."

"Why, of course, dear," she said. "Would you like Charley and Marshall? Perhaps we'd better." He sent a taxi to Martinelli's for two cold pheasants, some chianti, a bottle of Clicquot; Martha found the rest. They all discovered themselves hungry, and chattered, laughing at nothing. Charley talked in half a dozen dialects, Marshall spoke Mark Anthony's funeral oration, Martha imitated Duse and Bernhardt. He and Fleur sang negro spirituals, and she some lovely things also from Schumann and Wolff. He felt extraordinarily happy. The heat had left his blood.

He had ordered a car for one o'clock. By the time it came they were all tired; there were no foolish protestations against breaking up. He tarried for a moment with Martha, the others in the car. She took his hand in both hers. "Take great care of her, dear," she said. He put his arms round her and kissed her neck. "She's my life," he said.

They dropped Marshall and Charley. Charley stood waving on the footpath as if they were off to America.

Fleur sat leaning in his arms as they drove to Linthorpe. The moon was up and occasionally as the car turned, a beam of cold light fell through the window and caught her white satin dress, and the sparkle on her shoe. Her red velvet cape slipped from her shoulders and her pale arms and neck were dim and shadowy. When he kissed her she gave him her lips softly and confidingly, like a child. He began to feel extremely solemn and quiet and proud. Sometimes he would murmur "My beloved" and she would draw him a little nearer to her. For the rest they rode in silence. He deliberately avoided encountering her bosom, of great loveliness as it swelled lightly beneath her dress. She had surrendered herself and doing so, had unknowingly walked a pace away from him.

CHAPTER XVIII

He awoke once or twice during the night. He tried to keep awake for a time because it was too lovely to lose consciousness now that he believed Fleur loved him. His mind flew back to first nights out of trenches in France when he was deliciously aware of the beauty of sleep; then, when he awoke after the wonted four hours and found he had the whole night to spend, he had wriggled in his blankets and smiled and grunted happily and dozed off again. He had always declared he savoured those sleeps like wine, that he had never become merely dead but had slept half awake. He wished he could sleep half awake now, but it was impossible. His brain was clarified as though his mind had been washed in pure water and dried in a wind on the sea. Yet there was fever in him, he knew. He thought: "My mind has flushed cheeks; it goes dancing; soon it will be stupefied with fatigue." He slept fitfully; and awoke when Saddlebridge was awakening also. A first tram crashed into the points and ground steel on steel as it rasped round the bend, humming off to Burnham like a company of growling bees. Soon came horses' feet on the stone setts and a disconsolate whistling of "O Genevieve". Yet it was still not far from completely dark. It was savage, this stirring about in the night. Another hour or two and he would ask for the morning papers. He was only gently excited this

time. What did it matter what they said of the play, or of him, or for that matter, of Fleur? He had made up his own mind; and Fleur belonged to him. Come the whole something of the world in arms and he would shock them . . . how did it go? Never mind. He would write a good play now . . . in the future . . . he and she . . . but he must be careful he didn't grow too lazy because he knew in his bones he had worked half to win her and only half because he must; knowing or unknowing, men worked for women, the sex impulse. "Go to sleep you damned fool," he muttered. And presently he did. It was eleven o'clock when he awoke. He felt like a small boy when Susan roused him. He stretched himself luxuriously. All his life he had been fond of bed. When he had ailed, as so often he had, he had loved lying there, dreaming or half dreaming time away. When he was very small, Ben used to bring his violin in and play, asking Martin to choose the pieces. Martin had always chosen the music heavy with black quavers and semi-quavers and been grieved and astonished to find what little tune there was in it.

He smiled at Susan and leaned up and lolled on the pillows and asked: "What do the papers say?"

"It's my belief", she said, "those newspaper men aren't such good friends of yours as you think they are. Half of 'em would rather drop dead than say anything good."

"Um. Sounds bad. They've got to be just, Susan—just and entertaining."

"Call it justice if you like. If women did it you'd say they were cats. Some of 'em seem to think you took that part on purpose." She left him, mentioning at the door that Fleur had called and was downstairs. All Susan's motherly and tigerish instincts were roused, it seemed. Exaggerating, no doubt. When he came down, Fleur

smiled up from the newspapers as if he were not much more than a colleague. He didn't mind; he had no emotion himself at the moment.

"Well," he said, "what do t' papers say about us?"

"*The Courier* says your dialogue is brilliant and your plot is tripe."

"That's that damned Scotsman, Ewart," he said. "We sit on opposite sides of the gangway at the Queen's every Monday, nod, and never say a damned word. I won't speak because he might think I was trying to influence his criticisms and *he* comes from Auchtermuchty. What does he say about you?"

" 'Miss Armitage was coolly efficient but she must conquer her tendency to over-act,' he says."

"Like his confounded cheek."

"He's quite right. I do over-act."

"Rot. My words are so entrancing that you have a tendency to stress them—as is natural. Um. Otherwise you are perfection. Doesn't he say a word about my acting?"

"He says: 'Mr. Frobisher himself was called upon to play the part of Ralph Fairfax—a misfortune for the play, since nobody could accuse him of being an actor. We imagine he enjoyed it more than we did. At all events he seemed determined to have a run for his money, judging by the way he dashed about the stage.' I think that's a bit cheap."

He pondered. "No, I consider that a pretty good effort. If it weren't me he's writing about I should be entertained. Nothing like a bit of malice. The new journalism must be getting into his blood." He lay back and considered Ewart, the oldest critic in the neighbourhood. It was said he spent his evenings at the theatre devising means of

writing his notice so that it would be impossible for the new, youthful, dynamic editor of the *Courier* to see it was reduced to a third of a column. "No story is worth more than a third," that young man-in-the-street said. "Dramatic criticism doesn't sell the paper," he said; and Ewart's battle with the sub-editors only amused him. Ewart had been known to write the bottom half of his notice in one long sentence, tortuous, involved and littered with parentheses. But the subs. merely stopped half way through and popped his initials at the bottom as usual. What made it worse on those occasions was that nobody but Ewart could observe anything wrong with the notice. It was said, indeed, that he was complimented on one or two of them, which hardly ever happened in the ordinary way. Ewart had been a dramatic critic so long that he placed every play against a background of twenty or more years. He saw everything in relation to plays that had gone before, and he disliked ideas. If you looked back through the files, his enemies declared, you would find he had slated Ibsen and Chekhov and Shaw most bitterly, although, having at length got used to them, he praised them wholeheartedly to-day. Dull but honest; and now skittish at Frobisher's expense. He had called Frobisher the latest recruit to the "Manchester School" of drama, which Frobisher didn't altogether like. However, there it was; you had to put up with it.

"What does Gordon Wishart say?"

He saw a mental picture of Wishart as he asked. Wishart of the *Mercury* looked the part; that is to say, he looked a cross between Hall Caine and Beerbohm Tree in Tree's younger days. He lectured at the University and condescended to the drama in his leisure. He sailed along the foyer and through the stalls with a cloak billowing

slightly and revealing its shining, red lining. It was clasped at the throat like a toga. He bore a black, gold-knobbed stick to push the proletariat of Burnham gently out of his way, and carried a silk hat on his hair, lighter than blond and sleek and over-long. He had scandalized Burnham by this mode of dress, Burnham with its bulging, many-pocketed suits, its suspicion of evening clothes of any sort and absolute hatred of cloaks and silk hats; silk hats were for funerals and weddings, said Burnham. Patently Wishart didn't care a tinker's curse what Burnham thought, and Burnham, priding itself on being blunt and brusque and not caring a tinker's curse for anybody either, was hurt to the quick; for there's nobody like your rude folk for being swiftly injured. Burnham said, "Wishart writes about owt but t' play." And there was something in it. For plays bored him; he hated plays. There were far too many of them and those there were, were in any case, the wrong sort. They were realistic, or funny or vulgar or fairy-taleish; or they were cheaply pretentious or they were revues, or. . . . Anyway, he didn't care for them at all. He wrote of plays in a mixture of rebuke and irony and aloof cold praise that steered beautifully clear of humanity or enthusiasm or anything so low as anger. He kept his form and his Arctic style and dropped in a little French and Latin to puzzle the old gentlemen on 'Change who struggled with him as they struggled with the crossword puzzle to which the *Mercury* in a moment of aberration had recently descended. Wishart was not precisely a power in Burnham dramatic circles, but he was read. To be just to him, if he ever praised anything you could rely on the play being rather fine. But you never saw the advertisements recording a pungent or flamboyant line picked with discretion and

not too much honesty from his criticism; for of course, there was no such line. He was not quotable. You were not always sure except for names of theatre, cast and players that, in fact, he was not writing about the bouquet of a wine, the latest architectural freaks of Germany, or the decay of religion. So Frobisher was naturally anxious to know what Wishart made of "The Two Brothers".

Fleur said: "Most of the critique is devoted to the influence on you of Chekhov. He compares 'Two Brothers' with 'Three Sisters' to your considerable disadvantage."

"He doesn't point out, I suppose, that Pirandello has nothing on me?"

"No, but there is some dark reference to an author who had to go in search of a character, as distinct from six characters who once went after their author, but that is confused with a short dissertation on whether or not it is advisable for one brother to have another. He doesn't get down to vulgar detail either about you or me—the play has been acted by nobody, nowhere, so far as I can see."

"And the *Gazette*?"

"Oh, the *Gazette* does you well—in a way—you are on the main news page. You have the notorious divorce of Mrs. Moffatt on one side and the red motor-car murder on the other. It is all about a certain young playwright turned actor—word perfect—not nervous—tripe like that."

"It doesn't sound to me as if Cochran and the New York Theatre Guild will be pursuing us on the strength of those, Fleur." But he wasn't annoyed or disappointed; that would come later. He was never able to taste to the full the moment when it lived. He could anticipate it or look back on it—never seize and hold it and draw the essence from it.

He was taking porridge and bacon and, learning she had eaten only an apple with her coffee, began to grumble. "These confounded Continental fashions," he said; "pure pose. No wonder you're wooden at rehearsals—emotion on an apple. Don't you know that Ellen Terry always had a beefsteak?"

"Don't romance, Martin. I can't stand it at this hour of the day."

"You'll find me insupportable at breakfast, I daresay. I'm excessively hearty sometimes—whistling, back-slapping, tripping about. O God, why *do* days begin before eleven?" Suddenly he said: "Darling, let's be married and go to London. Aren't you sick of everything?"

"Pretty sick."

"We'll have a flat in Lincoln's Inn. Willy Beswick used to be there—black stone and gargoyles and pigeons in the courtyard, barristers' clerks darting about with large blue bags slung over their shoulders, red buses rolling down Chancery Lane, and so near the theatres and Fleet Street that we'll be able to walk home in five or ten minutes."

"A bit musty, I should say." She was laughing at him, her eyebrows pointed quizzically. Then she said: "Don't let's rush it, dear. You know how impetuous you are. I think we should go to London one day perhaps but not be married—not yet. You might find somebody else, you know." All at once he knew she meant that; her mouth had drooped at the corners and her eyes had darkened. He didn't answer; he went across and knelt beside her, his arms round her waist and his face in her lap. When he looked up he said: "I think you love me at last."

"I think so," she said, passing her fingers over his hair. "But, Martin dear, we've no jobs in London, and Mother won't want me to go."

"Please don't be hard and practical, darling."

"One of us must be, Martin."

"O hell, I suppose so. Look here, Willy Beswick will give me a job. He said he would any time. He's news-editing the *Tribune*. He said: 'When you're prepared to come for twelve guineas as a special writer, roll up.'"

"Twelve guineas won't take us far, darling."

"Pooh! You'll earn at least another ten understudying all the nobs."

"Lucky if I get five," she said.

"I shall blackmail a manager into giving you a job and suborn the *Tribune* critic into saying how terrific you are. And one night we'll have our names together in electric lights on Shaftesbury Avenue."

"Much more likely to have them down at the Labour Exchange."

"Haven't you got a hunch? Don't you *know* you're going to be famous?" But she shook her head and said, No. That reduced him to impotence for, she added, she wasn't ambitious, didn't want wealth and would probably marry a plumber.

"Nonsence—fiddlesticks—blather, you're going to fight and knock 'em all over the place, become the greatest comedy actress of our time, wipe the floor with them." But he saw it was no good; he was swept by a feeling of extreme foolishness, of bewilderment, of being out of his depth. For her eyes were wet. For a moment he was almost afraid of her; certainly ashamed of his own rough tongue and heavy gaiety. "Don't take any notice of me," he said miserably. "I'm as intelligent as a dray-horse this morning. We'll do exactly as you wish. Don't let me make you unhappy or drag you into things. *I'll* go to London

and write a play that'll run for a year and. . . . O God, I'm off again."

He smiled ruefully at himself and she said: "I'm the idiot, Martin, not you . . . only I'm a little tired, I think, I didn't sleep much." A smile curved her mouth.

As they rode down to the theatre in a taxi—Susan looking after them and thinking "He could spend ten thousand a year without any bother—just like his father——" Fleur began to say Masefield's:

> Death strews the brain with dust
> And soils the young limbs' glory,
> Death makes woman a dream
> And man a traveller's story;
> Death opens unknown doors,
> It is most grand to die.

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. It's very lovely, isn't it? I feel I've reached an end. I'm happy, and sad, too."

"I know," he said. "I'm like that, too." He turned his face and kissed her, gently as the wind.

CHAPTER XIX

FROBISHER JOINED the *Tribune* in Fleet Street as a descriptive writer a month later. The eyes of Fleur and Susan made him feel cruel. But once away, he was content. "You can't let women hold you—they'll be glad presently," he told himself. After three months he was still unsure what to make of Fleet Street. He hadn't conquered the novelty—London hadn't begun to shrink into comprehensible proportions. London, after the seriousness of Burnham, wore a holiday air. Every ride on a bus was a small adventure, every time he crossed Blackfriars or Westminster Bridge he paused a moment to glance up or down stream and look with delight at the rolling bronze water, the gulls, the low, dark barges, the pleasure-boats anchored midstream waiting for spring. "London river—London river," the words ran enchantingly in his head. Days went swiftly. Beswick found him stories he liked—the King at St. Paul's—an interview with Bernard Shaw—the Prince in the East End—a book to "gut"—a new play in the suburbs—a murder trial at the Old Bailey—Shakespeare at the "Old Vic". Between whiles he dashed to a flooded tube station, called at Scotland Yard, looked in the House of Commons to seek an M.P.'s opinion, described the last day of a by-election, and wore a diver's suit in a tank.

He watched Hatton Garden diamond merchants—

drab Jews who might have been tailors or clerks in their soft hats and nondescript suits—unrolling wallets on A.B.C. marble-topped tables, and displaying stones worth small fortunes over tuppenny cups of tea and coffee; he saw diamonds dropped among bread crumbs, picked up with forceps, and moistened in mouths—and he hoped one might be inadvertently swallowed. He visited Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields searching for opium, puk-a-pu and the mystery of the East and found only poverty and decay, Chinks looking disconsolate in trilbys and caps and draggled white women flitting to and fro. He dined in Cavendish Square with a Japanese poet, drank *sake*—first cousin to Irish poteen—ate quails roasted with chestnuts and celery dipped in vinegar. He partook of Go-Han the honourable rice and O-Cha the honourable tea, having at one moment eight dishes before him; and he learnt that in Japan there are feasts of the moon, the clouds, of snow, of the dead and "of the year forgetting". He caused a small sensation by attending a Guildhall banquet in a dinner jacket among the most remarkable assembly of British and foreign uniforms, Orders and medals he had ever seen, and he had a diverting Sabbath morning in Petticoat Lane among the modern cries of London. (He rubbed shoulders with the Corn King, and the Purse King, with a cheapjack who wore a topee and a watch-chain of full-size stirrups, swivels and springs, and with a leather-merchant in a naval cocked hat. He dodged among alarum clocks, jellied eels, fur coats, silk scarves, pineapples, banjos, chestnuts, boots, sheets, teddy bears, cough cure, balloons, overcoats, dogs, canaries, gramophones, a man in singlet and drawers doing feats of strength, and a man in a silk hat selling advice to young ladies.) He dined one night at a

coffee-stall off a sausage roll and a mug of coffee and lunched next day with oysters and champagne at the Savoy. On the same day he interviewed the flower-girls of Piccadilly Circus and met the Prime Minister. He wrote of the four brave yellow crocuses of Kew and of new inventions for harnessing the tides; he flew in aeroplanes, he sailed in ocean liners, and he dived beneath the sea in a submarine. He wandered in East End slums and he mixed, wearing an opera hat and evening clothes, with dukes and duchesses; he craved actors' views on silly topics and he dismissed the same actors with some hauteur in dramatic criticisms. He was at home at literary parties at Claridge's and equally at home in a fish and chip shop down east. In short, he was a newspaper man.

The reporters' room he found an amusing place—more light of heart than Burnham. Nobody took newspapers or, indeed, anything else quite so seriously as in the North. When Frobisher arrived Wadham said to him: "Why have you come here? Nothing whatever to do—and you, a fellow who writes plays. . . ." Wadham shook his head deprecatingly. He had a face ruddy as a judge's and black curly hair. He sat behind a pillar—remote, reading probably a novel inscribed to him by the author. Remarkably fine grey eyes and a deep cultured voice distinguished him. In this higgledy-piggledy place littered with desks and typewriters, with telephone books, newspapers, envelopes, dry ink bottles, and paste pots even more dry and filthy, Wadham preserved for the most part his poise, humour and dignity. He was regularly jerked from literature to investigate a poison food scare in the East End or a jewel robbery in Bond Street but on his return (usually an uncommonly swift return with the in-

formation that "There's nothing in this affair") he as rapidly engrossed himself once more. Sometimes Forest, the night news editor, would dash in excitedly, crying: "Wadham—off you go to Hackney—man murdered his wife and child—come on, now—none of your lead-swinging—no doing it over the phone—got to go down." An amused, dry smile would flit over Wadham's face as he leisurely rose and prepared to take himself off. "Silly scare—probably a Jew boy wanting to earn half a crown. Besides, why *shouldn't* a man murder his wife? No freedom left in the country," he would say. Over bitter beer he would ask Frobisher: "Are you solvent? I've never been solvent in my life. How can any one be solvent these days? You have children—a most unwise proceeding—and you send them to decent schools so they won't have to come into the Street—and there you are. After all, you can't permit your children to come into the Street, can you?"

Frobisher said: "You make it sound almost like coming *on* the street."

"Well, of course, it's amusing till you get grey in your hair and then you wish to God you'd never seen the place. The only people who make money on papers are the circulation men and advertising people—palatial rooms, and thick Turkish carpets, bouncy manners and big cigars. The gentlemen are the reporters—they get ordered about and do the beastly jobs and lose their nerve and develop horrible, ingratiating manners—either that or they become faintly thuggish in self-defence—and finally they become publicity agents—if they're lucky."

"Send me a postcard when you're going to be ingratiating or behave like a thug," bantered Frobisher.

Wadham had another drink and warmed up. "We

don't tell the blasted truth——"

"Nor does anybody."

"No, perhaps not. But we should. We don't print letters from East End readers because we're so damned snobbish that we're not supposed to have any readers farther east than the city."

"That's eyewash for the sake of advertisers."

"I know," said Wadham. "The other day I wrote a letter to the paper—old Buzfuz came and said he was hard up for one so I churned one out—suggesting that if you turned your hat back to front you lengthened its life by a hell of a lot. I always do that myself—I reckon it a most valuable discovery. What do you think old Buzfuz said? That hat-sellers would withdraw their adverts. Let 'em, I say! Let 'em! We ought to make the paper so good that they'd have to advertise in it whatever we said. When I went for these damned motor-cyclists the other day and said in certain hands a motor-cycle was a lethal weapon I was carpeted—carpeted, my dear fellow, not because what I said was untrue but because one of the directors has shares in a motor-cycle factory."

They wandered back to the office. Frobisher stopped to glance at the reporters' duty list. It was plastered with newspaper headings, cut out and pasted on. "Here is a challenge to the lackadaisical!" said one. Another: "You may laugh at these poor fish—to-day." Under the men's names on the letter-rack board, wits had pasted similar printed cuttings. Over Herbert Knight's slot was stuck "Police search for Bert", beneath Frobisher's was "Up from t' country", Bridgeman's bore the words "Takes a bath" and beneath Elizabeth Cadman's was "Our domestic pet".

Persiflage and laughter and loud talk were flying about.

In the middle of it three men and a woman were writing on silent typewriters. Elizabeth Cadman had been to a service of the Order of St. Michael and St. George at St. Paul's. "I wish you people would shut up," she said patiently, putting down her horn-rimmed spectacles. "Ah, poor Elizabeth," said Bridgeman, putting his arm round her shoulders. "Why, damn it, you haven't worked in about that shaft of sunlight that falls through the west window—or is it the east—illumining. . . . What the hell does it illumine? Here, Wadham! What does that damned shaft of sunlight illumine?"

"When I was there last," said Wadham, "it shone on a pigeon that was flying, scared to death, round the dome and that manifestly had been sent from Heaven to typify the souls of the dead who were being commemorated. At all events I said it had—or rather I hinted. Anyway, that pigeon saved my life that day. It was the only thing in the story."

Somebody asked Bridgeman how the murder was getting on. "Fine," said Bridgeman, "that's why they've fetched me back. We'd thought of a damned good story to-day, too. We'd decided to buy some French chalk, conceal it in the chimney, and get the landlord of the pub where the poisoning was done to find it; then the police would have been pretty well bound to send it for analysis. 'Secret powder sent for bacteriological examination.' Always looks good—'bacteriological'. I remember once we used it in a story and John Kent got on to give his people the story but he'd had too many drinks and he couldn't say it. They thought he was saying 'Toorol-oorol-lay' and asked him whether he was the crime reporter or writing about Maypoles and village greens."

"Who thought of the Huckleberry Finn idea?"

"Oh, that was synthetic. We were absolutely up against it that day. Then I remembered Huckleberry—how he placed some mercury in a loaf of bread and it floated down the stream and stopped over the body. So Fenton bought a loaf and Pomfret got some quicksilver and we saw a medium-bloke who'd held a séance about the murder and got him to believe it would be a good idea. Next we persuaded him to go to the police and water bailiff to suggest it. Then we went along and said we'd heard about the suggestion—and after that it was all plain sailing."

Bridgeman looked like an actor—greying hair, monocle, spats, but burly, double-breasted blue coat, incisive manner in cross-questioning. "Now tell me!" he would say to those he interviewed. Half of them thought he came from New Scotland Yard. They were scared of him. "Well they might be," he would say. "They've probably all committed some murder or other." The *Tribune* had once invited readers to inform them of mysterious people living in their neighbourhoods and Bridgeman had spent weeks investigating them. He claimed to have found at least twelve probable murderers—mysterious men and women who came from no one knew where and had settled down in remote spots. He had the darkest doubts of human nature, for part of his time was spent exposing share-pushers and "bucket shops". He was so enormous that he thought nothing of telling a man: "I say this is a damned swindle. Now, what do you say to that?"

The junior crime man, Ellis, claimed to have been at one time special correspondent for backache pills. "I used to go about the country writing up those articles: 'For fifteen years I had spots before the eyes, and dizzy bouts every time I got out of bed, but since taking your pills. . . .'"

After that he became music critic on the *Financial Recorder*, trebling with it "Uncle Arthur" of the *Sunday Gazette* and late sub. on the *Weekly Standard*, going on duty at 10 p.m. Saturday and staying on till 6 a.m. Sunday. Ellis told with gusto how on a certain tour of Devon by the King, two old villagers hung over a gate and, as the press car drove by, asked, one of the other: "Garge, who be these funny fellers ridin' larst?" to which Garge replied: "O them! Them mun be the King's barstards." Besides Ellis there was Oldroyd who came from Hull and specialized in curious stories. Oldroyd said he had met two men who could read letters in your pockets—one of them a Spanish grandee who never played cards because he could see through the pack. Oldroyd had written the story of the "Men with X-ray eyes" three times and three times the *Tribune* had turned it down. Their specialist in the occult (who came from Dunfermline and objected to anybody trespassing on his preserve of the next world or even the border line between the two) said Oldroyd's stories were too steep. Oldroyd replied that the Dunfermline man, who was a sub-editor, knew no more of the occult than could be learned travelling to Brixton and back on the tram. Oldroyd had a head like a soccer football and bristly hair. He wore gay club ties which he swore were those of the Yorkshire Light Infantry, but which everybody else affirmed were the badge of Tooting Bec Tennis Club. Ellis, it should be mentioned, made ebony walking sticks with ivory tops and was never seen without one. There was, too, a very old reporter named Giles. Frobisher wasn't sure for weeks whether Giles was his first name or his surname. He was from Somerset and had the blue eyes of a child and the thirst of a cabby. Giles had come to the *Tribune* when the *Tribune* absorbed the *Mercury* and he

had been taken over on the *Mercury* when that organ swallowed the *Courant*. "I may be tough," Giles said in consequence, "but dammit, I'm digestible." In his idle moments—and indeed Giles smoked a vast quantity of shag and did very little work—he described to Frobisher how he had travelled 750,000 miles in search of news, how he had gone to report the funeral of an Archbishop and wakened to find himself lying on the grave next morning, how he had been sent to Paris with instructions to wait there for further orders and when seen by a Fleet Street colleague drinking in the Rotonde, Montmartre, a fortnight later, exclaimed: "Sh! They've forgotten where they've sent me to." Giles had slept on the Embankment to get hard-luck stories, had worn Court dress and Highland kilt, trod the quarter-deck of battleships, hob-nobbed with Field-Marshals, been arrested as a spy, sat on the bench with friendly magistrates, ridden a "penny-farthing" bicycle and flown in an aeroplane. His principal grievance at the moment was that the assistant manager had fixed an automatic pencil sharpener near his desk and every half hour or so somebody would stroll in from another department to use it. "I felt the same", Giles said, "when I had a motor car and people struck matches on it"—the joke being that he had been burdened with far too many children to afford even a bicycle. Giles had only one fad —he gummed tiny slips of paper on his matchboxes with "This side up" written on so that matches wouldn't spill on the floor. He said he had often thought of patenting the idea. If you asked Giles how many words he had written he would say: "Well, five or six millions too many. If you wrote three novels a year for forty years, you'd be getting somewhere near it. If I'd put the same energy into business, Lipton and Jesse Boot wouldn't have been

especially if they're written by pals. They spend half their time praising and abusing and soft-soaping and satirizing one another; but mostly they praise—in print anyway, though they say nasty things over their beer. Very keen on beer, some of 'em are—pints of beer and red beef sandwiches, hunks of cheese, flannel trousers and Harris tweed jackets, big boots and hooked pipes. Hearty isn't the word. B.f.'s game writing books, anyhow—you can't be sure, if you're not in the swim, that your book'll be reviewed at all, or if it's reviewed that the reviewer will have read it. I reckon the average time spent on a book is ten to thirty minutes. They have reputations for speed—so and so can 'gut' a book in ten minutes, somebody else can get through twenty in an afternoon, another fellow wades through over a thousand books a year and swears nine hundred and ninety are tripe. The dramatic critics are better—they *do* see the thing they write about and they're pretty honest about the play—except when they're persuading the managers to put their girls into jobs, or they're trying to blossom out into playwrights. Then, everything the management puts on while their own play lies in the office is marvellous—and, everything that goes on after the play's rejected is bloody awful."

"Why the hell do you write books at all?" Frobisher asked him.

"As far as I can make out," said Bridgeman, "it's swank—that and pandering to people's snobbishness. If I go to see a bloke as Bridgeman of the *Tribune* he doesn't give a damn for me; but if he knows I wrote *Murder in the Tube* he takes his pipe out of his mouth when he talks to me, and wants me to meet the wife. Any idiot knows there's better stuff written in newspapers every day than in seventy-five per cent of novels—but the novelists are

the high-ups in the social scale and journalists are ten a penny."

"Social scale—hell! We should worry," said Ellis. "Makes me laugh to see the swankers pushin' to get in at a murder trial and standing in court, close and sweaty like a football match and me waltzin' in and out phonin' paragraphs."

Garton, a tall, thin man with a classical face and gentle blue eyes said: "What's the good of pretending? I've been snubbed so often lately that when anybody treats me decently, I want to cry. I had to ring up Bernard Shaw the other day and ask him what his favourite soup was. Imagine that! I've been a reporter twenty-five years and that's the best thing they can find me to do."

This mixture of truth and exaggeration and mis-statement entertained Frobisher. He suspected that London journalism lacked some of the integrity and modesty and accuracy of that of the North. People were more light-minded; provided the story was good reading they cared less whether it was strictly true. London was so huge that, if a story wasn't actually libellous, reporters could better afford to "take a chance" with an interview or a description; they weren't likely to rub shoulders with the people again. Most people seemed to talk in the language of actors and actresses. That is to say, a job worth ten pounds a week became worth, in conversation, twenty or thirty pounds a week. They sang on a top note all the time. Book publishers advertised that books were in their fifth impressions when they were actually in their third, when the publisher had ordered a fourth and hoped a fifth would be necessary; and, anyway, "impression" might mean anything from 500 to 5,000.

London was witty; the north was humorous; London used the stiletto of malice with devilish skill while the north floundered about throwing half-bricks of rudeness. Competition in London was harder, keener, more ruthless; the ship of life sailed more perilously, and friends and foes were jettisoned without hesitation to keep it afloat. London was excessively swift and clever at acclaiming those who had "arrived" and being distant and cold to whose who struggled still. Promises were lightly given and lightly regarded; people tended to be rather worse than their word. Roots were less secure, life less sincere. People, he thought, grew and lived too fast. These, at all events, were the impressions taking shape in his mind. He wasn't altogether sure about them; perhaps he was narrow and over-critical. London was certainly a lovely place; life had a graciousness and roundness the north lacked. Women were far prettier and better dressed. Courtesy was greater, people hated to be rude. Maybe that was why they made promises they never intended to keep. Waiting for a bus a casual acquaintance would say: "You must come and dine with us," because he couldn't bear to leave you abruptly and in reply you murmured: "Love to." Neither of you meant it. Once you realized the formula it was all right. In Portugal, he understood, if you were lunching *al fresco* and a stranger passed, you invited him to share your meal; but you knew, and he knew, that unless the invitation was repeated three times it was not to be accepted. All very pleasant and amiable if a trifle silly—silly, anyway, from a Saddlebridge point of view. And about journalism. Dammit, if people *wanted* to be entertained irrespective of facts, well. . . . Why take things so seriously? Supposing you couldn't get an eye-witness story of an aeroplane smash and you invented one

—a picturesque affair, involving nobody's reputation as a pilot or anything of that sort—invented how the smash sounded or looked (it was the fashionable thing to liken it to something in the war) well, what were the odds, as Ellis would inquire. The true eye-witness was probably a liar anyway or assuredly an untrained, unreliable observer whose story would be half imagination and half observation all askew; and your own imagination was doubtless better than his. Again, supposing you were describing a Westminster Abbey funeral and you made the voices go fluting through the nave like a heavenly choir when, in truth, the treble soloist sang sharp? Damn it all, you couldn't *say* he sang sharp; you would hurt the bereaved. O hell! It wasn't any good. At bottom he knew this falsity was rotten journalism. Gradually he would begin to amplify, colour, invent—and the more you coloured the more you went on colouring, went on until you said: "Don't tell me any facts. They cramp my style." That was the sort of thing every descriptive writer jokingly said when, in truth, every one of them worth his salt knew that nothing but keen touches of detail and fact built up the impression. As Wadham argued: "If you talk about Horse Guards' nodding plumes it means little, but describe how the parting plumes showed points of brass on which the sun sparkled and glinted, and you've got it." Damn good chap, Wadham. He'd write good books if he weren't too lazy. Good job most men were lazy or there'd be no chance for him, Frobisher. He always said with a wry grin: "My task in life is to spur on other folks. They say: 'My hat, if that b.f. Frobisher can do it, *I* can.'" Oh well, it didn't matter being a b.f. if you did your best. Somebody had said he would be proud of that for an epitaph,

"He was a b.f. but he did his best." But this descent to highly-coloured journalism wasn't doing your best. Hell! Here he was round the mulberry bush again.

What would Fleur think of it? Fleur was a touchstone, a sort of metal in whose proximity he put his thoughts or actions to see if they tarnished her. He could imagine her saying: "If you go on doing something that you're ashamed of, you'll become crooked, or stained. Stop it. Starve rather. Sweep the streets, rather." But he could imagine her saying too: "Don't be morbid. You know very well whatever job you do, some of it you'll hate like the devil. Think of the end a little more. Newspapers are terribly important. What about the critics who encourage art, music, letters? What about your terrible searchlight on wickedness, scandal, waste, dishonour? What about your power for teaching the right ideas, thoughts, decencies? Nobody and nothing in the world can compare with you for that. Think of the millions who read every word you write. It ought to make you proud and afraid of cheapening your job. Hang it all, I'm only repeating what you've said yourself fifty times. It's the biggest job in Christendom. Didn't the Lord Chief Justice tell you that?"

He was walking past the Law Courts towards Trafalgar Square when these thoughts ran through his head. He began to smile to himself as he thought of Fleur. Ho, but she could put it across him! Out of his own mouth very often, too. Well, that showed he had humour, this ability to laugh over it. Yes, he had always prided himself on that.

CHAPTER XX

He ran after a bus, which had slowed up in traffic and now began to move swiftly. The conductor watched him with a speculative eye and when he saw Frobisher was losing, pulled his little rope and rang the bell. The bus swerved in to the curb and Frobisher gained on it and leapt. The conductor eyed him judicially and said with a tinge of admonition as Frobisher stood recovering his breath: "Anuvver just be'ind, yer know, sir. Still, you 'ad a run fer it." He seemed to think Frobisher was getting a good deal for his money. There wasn't the least reason why Frobisher should have raced, but it was difficult to chase a bus, lose it and comport oneself with dignity. He had tried it before.

His heart was still pounding. Occasionally it would hesitate, almost pause and then gallop again, before steadying. Saddlebridge would have called it a "dot and carry one" action, he thought, his upper lip lifting in a twisted smile. But it was disconcerting. In bed, more than once, it had distinctly paused and he had lain in cold fear, stiff and afraid, half wondering why he didn't die till, with a leap, the beating had begun, racing like an accelerated engine. Susan used to twit him with: "Go on. If you cut your finger you think you're going to die," and he, a little hurt, had answered, trying to be amusing: "I'll die on your hands one day. You jolly-well look out." But that

was before the war. The war in certain degree had thinned and refined the metal of him—it often alarmed him to know the ease with which his emotions were played on—but he had a measure of assurance, a background against which to set trials and worries; the misfortune was he so often forgot to use it. But the war in refining him, had over-sensitized his heart. Might it not stop altogether one day? Maybe it was worn out, an old man's heart, the sort that made a bishop die while preaching or a company director collapse at a meeting. He saw himself running after a bus and rolling dead in the gutter; or he might be telephoning a big story and collapse in the middle. Or he might die in Fleur's arms within a week of marrying her. By God, he mustn't do that. He pushed his fingers inside his waistcoat and rested them on his hard chest. He could feel his ribs. "The wonder is, it hasn't stopped ages ago," he thought. "Beating, on, on, from the moment I drew breath till now; twenty-eight years. It's unreasonable. And when it stops I shall die. We don't give our poor bodies a chance. We exhaust them, bruise them, poison them with drink or starve them of food for hours; we'd never treat horses or dogs so. We coop our bodies up in stuffy, ill-lighted dens and then we rush off to the country and tire them out trying to make up. As for the war—bodies hadn't a chance; they suffered quite eight or ten years' stress in four years. At the best, I am not 28 but 34. I am probably liable to drop dead at any moment. Yes, that will be how it is." He felt a certain grim satisfaction in coming to that conclusion. His death would be a tragedy: "Frobisher, so full of promise." . . . *The Burnham Gazette* would give half a column to him—perhaps a column. "Our readers will remember his distinguished work in these columns. . . ." Dead men's work always

became distinguished, in the *Gazette* obits., provided they had written for the paper. Grundy would say: "Poor old bloody Frobisher. Funny blighter—should have been damn good—would have been if only he'd made up his mind what the hell it was he was after—but when he was writing for the paper he was thinking of the theatre and when he was in the theatre he was thinking, 'The only decent blokes are newspaper chaps. You *do* know where you are with *them*.' Probably he's kicked the bucket because he didn't want to live enough, wasn't sure whether he had any right to live with all the other blokes dead. He was like smoke in the wind, blown all over the damn shop by sympathies, and hatreds, and generosities, and kinks. He wore himself out by worrying about things he hadn't the strength to put right; saw himself as a blooming reformer, leading agitations, getting bloody eloquent, swaying the populace, being shoved in clink by an asinine set of laws and being crucified when he came out by the very mob he'd gone to clink for. I know, because he told me these things. He used to say: 'I've got the mind for a martyr—my eyes see straight, not round corners—but I haven't got the guts; I always know the right thing to do and I haven't got the strength of mind or body to do it. If only I could be a religious fanatic and draw strength from my faith; but I can't. I can't believe in God or any other Divine being or prophet.' Another thing wrong with him —the world being as it is—was that he was too just and too Goddam frank to get on very far. He tried to play up to people—butter 'em up when it was policy to do it, but sooner or later his tongue betrayed him. If you did something he disliked, sooner or later he blurted it out. And even when he knew it would get him into trouble, he let his tongue have its way. Almost took a savage delight in

letting himself down. I've seen him tell the editor he thought some pet idea of his was silly or unfair—just whatever he thought. Then he'd take me out for a drink and say: 'I was just on the point of getting some more pay too; that'll have gone west now. Ah, well. It *was* a silly blasted idea, anyway, wasn't it? And it's time somebody told him.' Then he'd laugh and say: 'Damn funny, isn't it? All the top dogs say: "I don't want 'yes, yes' men round me. They're no good. I want men who'll disagree when they think I'm wrong." But, by God, when you're a "no, no" man like me, you don't half get it in the neck.'"

His mind had rambled on. He doubted whether Grundy would really say all that, whether he knew him well enough. He had been writing—or thinking—his own obituary. The bus swung round Oxford Circus and he got out at Selfridge's and walked up Baker Street to the Marylebone Club. Three hundred men lived there, civil servants, lawyers, doctors, retired army and navy men, bank clerks and stockbrokers, but you could be exceedingly lonely. You could sit in saddle-backed rather dowdy leather chairs in the lounge and drop off to sleep without speaking to a soul. Frobisher liked it. You met the same men on your corridor day after day in bath gowns, looking remarkably unpleasant, with dishevelled hair, or in evening clothes with shiny top-hats and ebony walking sticks, and you passed them with a steady gaze empty of recognition. Frobisher was as good as another at doing that. The valet brushed and folded your clothes, the chambermaid came in and jerked up your window-blind with the regularity of a clock, your waitress never presumed to know what you wanted for breakfast although you had the same grape fruit, porridge and plain bacon morning after morning; only the porter at the

letter rack permitted himself to know your name and to produce your letters unasked. Altogether it was quite English—clean, efficient, heavily comfortable, cold and aloof. It suited him finely. When a woman dined with you it was very secret; she came and went by a different entrance and you dined in the special guest-room where were an odd screen or two; somebody received her and looked after her wants, and you waited, wondering where on earth they took her to. Presently she appeared all powdered, smiling, exquisite. You felt she knew more about the club than you did.

After dinner this evening, though, he spoke to Montgomery—a short, equable man, with flat collar, sandy moustache and a very square forehead, who was engaged in cancer research.

Montgomery said: "Heart? What's the matter with it? Probably your imagination. Come up to my room. No, don't take the lift, run up the stairs." They trotted up the stairs. Frobisher was thinking: "How does he know I won't drop dead?" He was a trifle disappointed that nothing happened, nothing except that he was throbbing like an engine when he sat on Montgomery's narrow bed. "Seems to go all right," said Montgomery drily, holding his wrist and putting his stethoscope inside his shirt. "Too fast, of course; may be some weakening of the muscle. War, eh? Ever had the cardograph on you? That's the only way. I'll fix it up with Bartram." Two days later Frobisher went to a large grey Victorian house in Queen Anne Street and waited in a room furnished in mahogany and blue figured tapestry. The room was so big that he walked about to feel less lonely. A young woman secretary appeared with notebook and pencil and said, "Now I think we're ready for you" (he felt like an exhibit) and

showed him into a room, one side of which was occupied by a long walnut instrument that looked, with its switches, camera motor, lantern and time-marker, a cross between the control-gear of a locomotive, the dashboard of a motor car, a gargantuan photographic machine, and a cotton-mill yarn-tester. All these, at all events, occurred to him. A precise young man with very black hair that had constantly to be pushed out of his eyes came in, and briskly pulled down the blinds, so that the room was plunged into faint greyish dark. "What are you going to do with me?" asked Frobisher. The half-dark always made him feel queer. "It's like a damn séance," he thought.

"You won't feel anything at all," said the young man brightly.

"How does it work?"

"It makes a sort of photographic record of the beating of your heart. There's a fibre three-thousandths of a millimetre thick that vibrates. They used a similar instrument in the war for telling where shells came from."

"What about nervousness? Do you allow for that? You know about the pretty woman doctor who always allowed ten beats for her attractiveness."

"Speed makes no difference," said the youthful voice. "The variation in the curve, is the same. Will you sit here, please, and take off a shoe and sock?"

Frobisher placed a bare foot on a damp coolish pad in a porcelain receptacle. With his hands he gripped two other moist pads in bowls. "Sit back and relax," said the young man.

The instrument glowed and whirred, reminding him of a ship at sea at night. "Damn it, it's like the electric chair," he thought. Frobisher expected a shock but he

didn't get one. "Making a picture of your innards; what'll they do next?" he mused. But secretly, he had a feeling of small satisfaction. He was the centre of the picture; he was being dramatized; no doubt the same feeling Mrs. Laverack had when she was having a baby. The instrument stopped. The young man pulled up the blinds. (Frobisher never knew why the blinds were drawn. He wondered if it were partly for effect—modern science with a touch of the occult? Probably not, but these fellows tried to impress you—great houses, stiff servants, writing in red or violet ink—eyewash like that. Um.) The young man trotted out with the record and by the time Frobisher had dried his foot and got his shoe on, the youth was holding open the door. Dr. Peter Bartram, who came from Cheshire, was an elongated edition of Lloyd George and sat in his fine room as if he were unaware of its pretensions. "Well," he said, shaking hands, "your heart's all right." Then he looked with his amused violet eyes into Frobisher's. Frobisher swallowed and said: "Oh! That's fine, isn't it?" but somehow, he wasn't very sure. He felt as though he were being accused of pretence. "What are the symptoms?" asked Dr. Bartram, preparing to write with a magnificent white ivory pen that had a scarlet tail.

"Goes too fast—sometimes seems to stop. Saved my life in the army—prevented my return to France; warned not to do all sorts of things. Lately the thing has seemed worse."

Bartram wrote it all down—age, history, profession. Frobisher thought: "Um! Earning his five guineas—making a show."

"Strip and come and be X-rayed."

Frobisher exposed his spare body and put a bath robe

on. The girl secretary preceded him into a tiny cupboard-like room. He stood on a dais his back against an easel, with a square wooden frame on his chest, a frame that reminded him of an enormous slate at a child's school. Bartram hung the slate straight, put on a pair of thick ugly leather gloves, moved behind to the machine and switched off the lights. More whirring—far more powerful this time. If Frobisher had suddenly blown up he would not have been surprised. It was like being in a sinister and mysterious power house. "Ajax defying the blasted lightning," said his bemused mind. Under instructions, he turned first half right and then half left. The machine slowed down and stopped. "Now you can dress," said Bartram. Frobisher thought, "I should damn well think so. Why do all this, if there's nothing wrong with me?" But again he was thinking: "I'm having a lot for my money, anyway." That pleased him; they had used machines that must have cost hundreds upon hundreds of pounds. When he was dressed Bartram said: "Fine heart, right size, right shape." Frobisher paid him five guineas and Bartram told him he could safely ignore all worrying symptoms. Rapidity of beat meant nothing; all the doctors who had told him his heart was faulty were wrong. Three months down the Mediterranean would do him good; and so on.

"You mean", said Frobisher, "I was never intended to do any work?"

"No more than you can help. Go and live in Sicily."

They grinned at one another.

"You know," said Frobisher, "I always knew I was built for a millionaire."

He wrote to Fleur:

"Dearest,

"The troops are laughing. So will you in a minute. I've had the most terrific wind-up—thought I was going to drop dead. Yes. Heart. No, darling, not because my love for you is so great that the engine is so busy beating for you it has no strength to beat for me—that *is* nearly true, though—but because I got it into my head it was acutely diseased and might stop at any time. Don't tell me any more I have no imagination. I've been X-rayed, and what not. And it seems I'm the worst malingerer in Town. I'm as sound as the Bank of England. And if you hear of some ethereal, lantern-jawed, hairpin-bent, taciturn, cross-grained, inarticulate, son of a gun, flying the Atlantic or swimming the Channel you will know your beloved (I hope he is your beloved) is testing out his machine. All this is extremely young, I know, but I'm feeling mighty young to-night. Thus:

> When God hewed out the spaces of the night
> And set the stars and lit them with a flame
> When oceans broke, were born, and felt His might
> And mountains first bore witness to His name,
> I think He planned a woman in your mould
> As tall and straight and with as fine a face
> And strove all down the years to make as bold
> And lovely one who'd have your grace
> And failed; until at length He fashioned you.
> When first the world was made our course was set
> Beloved, why should we struggle now we're met?

That's a few lines short somewhere but what it lacks in skill . . . etc.

"But what I'm writing to say is this. Now that I know there's nothing the matter with me (other than all the things you know of) I've decided to undergo a small operation. I can't honestly say it is absolutely necessary

but the thing offends me and at the cost of £50 and a fortnight in a nursing home I find it can be shifted. Means a certain amount of cutting behind the ear and I shall resemble a wounded hero, which will be a new sensation. I daresay I am foolish, but there it is. If the Almighty can't do his job properly or alternatively if a bit of shrapnel so irritates my head that it rises up in indignation years later, we must put it right. *I* must, anyway. I go in the nursing home Monday afternoon; operation 10 a.m. Tuesday. I'll wire you when it's over. Don't worry. Remember I should be too scared to do this if there were the least fear of anything going wrong. Best love always, Martin."

"Isn't it time you came to look for a job? Only don't come and sit by me when I come out of the anæsthetic or I'll think I've died and gone to heaven."

Fleur replied:

"Martin dear,

"Your love of secrecy terrifies me. One day you'll go to China and send me a five-shilling wireless from the ship to say good-bye. You are shameless. You are indulging your love for taking risks and being morbid and making a play of yourself at the price of fifty pounds and my nerves. How can you become unconscious without there being a risk? Don't you know hundreds die under chloroform every year? Besides, I thought you always said doctors were idiots? How do you know this one who says you are perfectly well (I know you're not. Your letters are jumpy and a little hysterical. You are overworking and nervy and you know it) isn't an idiot too? Oh my dear, do be careful. You are horribly vain, that's the trouble. You think everybody stares at a swelling behind your ear,

when, of course, the truth is nobody stares at you at all—nobody notices you! Darling, if you want to do it you must do it I suppose, only if anything goes wrong I shan't be able to bear it. If you want me to come I will. I may come, anyhow. I don't know. Everything is at sixes and sevens at the Little. The plays after next week aren't fixed. Next week I'm a Cockney in 'The Likes of 'Er'. 'An' I ups wiv mi German-band an' I givs 'im one, see.' Can you see me doing it? Yells of 'Like hell I can.' I'm trying to write this in the dressing-room. Martha sends her love and advises you to think clean before you go under or you'll be talking the most indiscreet things and swearing horribly when you come out. The silver lining is, she says, you may wake up a different person—modest and intelligent and nice to know. She says she had gas once and thought she was a sausage jumping about in a frying-pan and a man she loved came round saying he was God and would they send for the police because General Booth had stolen his watch? Anæsthetic brings the subconscious to the surface and if you can interpret, you can discover your urges and complexes and inhibitions and go all Freudian and Prousty. Thank you for the piece of sonnet, darling, which is very foolish but made me feel glad. Still, I think you're better at plays and—reporting the police court. And—and—Martin dear, *when* are you going to cease worrying and frightening me? You went off to London because you said you suddenly couldn't stand Burnham and Saddlebridge any more. I know you were right to go, only—somehow, I felt then you were capable of digging up your roots and plunging off anywhere, forsaking everybody, shipwrecking everything without warning. I suppose it's the bit of artist in you. We've discussed this before—about the true artist forsaking wife,

home, everything if they get in the way of his work? Would you do that? I could imagine you doing it. I don't think I should blame you—at least I hope I shouldn't but I might. Women fight to keep what they've got, I think. And now this operation. I feel there's something in you stronger than you are—some streak of madness perhaps; I don't mean ordinary insanity—something that is part of your ability—and that when it rises up it's like a fever, a wanderlust, and it sweeps you away. This is a rambling letter and I don't think I've said what I want; only, my dear, I shouldn't have written it if I hadn't—well, hadn't loved you, Fleur."

The letter elated him. Her worry ought to have depressed him, made him contrite; but it didn't. He was damned selfish, liked to see her worry over him. Damn it, he must be something of a sadist. Was he? Had he more evil in him than most people? He examined himself. No, he didn't thing he had. His delight—was it anything more than the measure of his joy that she could care so much?

As he drove in a taxi to the Pantheon Nursing Home in Wigmore Street he had moments when he wished he had never embarked on the adventure. It could be argued that it was foolhardy; would he ever forgive himself supposing by some stupid mischance. . . . He could imagine his spirit winging, well, winging somewhere or other, cursing him for being impetuous. Still, the principle was there. This thing insulted him. Very well, he would have the surgeon tackle it. If it defeated them he, Frobisher, couldn't help it. He would have done what he could; kept faith. Impatient, yes. He always was. Caution; caution damned a man anyway. Besides, he

wouldn't go under. He hadn't come through the war to go under in a swagger nursing home. Providence might be devilish good at bungling but not so stupid as that; not where he, Frobisher, was concerned, not over a petti-fogging operation like this.

He walked up the stairs at the nursing home because, he was told casually, a case was coming down from the theatre in the lift. Walnut panelling, flowers, page boys. A liveried porter brought up his bags, a nurse fetched hot water, clean towels, new soap. Like an hotel. Sister came and said he would have a light dinner, and afterwards he could bath and go to bed when he liked. He spoke to her about a matinée; when did she think. . . . "You'll be awfu' full o' anæsthetic till Tuesday nicht. Yo' won't feel verry perrky till aboot Frriday afternoon." She was burly and businesslike and she emanated security. At eight he went down and spoke to Fleur over the telephone. She sounded very sad over those 200 miles of wire; he suspected there were tears in her voice. He tried to be bright but it was hopeless. He was nervy and strung-up and a flood of emotion rose in his throat. Was he a brute to be doing this? She would never sleep; and (as soon as he had put the receiver on and walked a few yards away) he knew that *he* would. He had stopped in the lounge turning over the pages of *The Tatler* and *The Sketch*, when a chirpy voice behind him said:

"Hullo. Welcome to the Pantheon."

It was Parker the surgeon, a short, tubby man with waxed moustaches and merry, grey-green eyes. He looked Frobisher up and down. "Wilson the anæsthetist will be in to see you. Have a quiet night and get to bed early. See you about a quarter to ten in the morning. So long." He might have been fixing up a game of golf.

Frobisher went up to his room and tried to read. Every footstep brought up his eyes from the page, but no Wilson. At ten o'clock he went to bed. He slept. At six-thirty a.m. the petite Irish nurse from Kilkenny disturbed him. "Here's your early morning tea." Her black hair curled and her cheeks were rosy and her eyes sparkled as if she had been up for hours.

"Don't I get any toast or anything?"

She tossed her head and answered: "Indeed, no. You're having a 'general' aren't you? Very well, then."

"Heaviness may endure for a night but nurse cometh in the morning," he said.

"What do ye mane by that?" she asked. She didn't quite know whether to laugh, or look sideways at him. "Well, anyway," he said, "it's a pity about the toast. If I strike my chest I rumble like a drum." She made nothing of him and went out. At eight-thirty his head was washed in methylated spirits and bound up by the fat Scottish sister. The fumes nearly made him sick, got on his empty chest and made him cough. Over an hour to go. Like the army again—troops ready hours before the officers. He put on his dressing-gown and paced round two sides of the small blue and white room. The morning was dull and grey but now and again a shaft of steel-gold sunlight streamed through the window and fell on his bandages. An omen? Fleur. No breakfast for her, either, no doubt. He wondered what the surgeon was eating. Sausages and bacon, for a sovereign. Lord, how sickeningly empty he was. At nine forty-five a nurse warned him to be ready. He grinned at that. He had been ready about fifteen hours. He picked up Masefield's poems, opened at random and began to read:

"Man is a sacred city built of marvellous earth. . . ."

Damn it all, this was Fleur's favourite poem—the one she recited in the car the day after the play.

"Death makes woman a dream and man a traveller's story. . . ."

He stared out of the window. The sun had gone. He read on again:

"Death opens unknown doors. It is most grand to die."

He shut the book and walked about. Damned funny hitting on that. Fleur was scared about the operation, and now. . . . Did it mean anything? Strange things had happened in France. John Steele had known he would be killed on the raid at Montauban. Did he, Frobisher, feel anything would go amiss? No, and yet . . . why the hell hadn't the anæsthetist tested his heart the night before? He would try again. He opened the book at:

"We seek the city of God and the haunt where beauty dwells,
And we find the noisy mart and the sound of funeral bells."

The door opened and the nurse said: "We're ready for you."

He replied: "Another moment, nurse, and I should have been reading the funeral service." She stared at him coldly. He felt suddenly gay. "Why don't you feed me? When a man's hanged he does at least get his breakfast." They shot up in the lift.

He walked into the theatre and saw Parker scrubbing his hands ferociously. The anæsthetist, sandy-haired, Scotch, came forward with wet hands, looking quizzically at him as if to say: "Aye, my fine fella, in aboot five minutes I'll hae ye where I know where to put my hands on ye." In the background was the theatre sister, greying hair poking underneath her cap, gold-rimmed spectacles,

prim. Frobisher climbed on to a narrow trolley.

"Soon will you and I be lying,
Each within our narrow bed."

The melancholy hymn fluttered into his head.

"Don't lie down yet," said the anæsthetist. "Tak' your things off. I want to listen to your heart. . . . Aye, a bit quick." Frobisher, still feeling exalted by the excitement, said: "That must be because of the nurse from Kilkenny." Parker turned his head and grinned.

Wilson went on. "I'm goin' to squirrt into your mooth. Ivery time I squirrt you breathe oot. Ah! . . . like that. An' when I've done, you spit it oot on this."

"Bitters without the sherry," murmured Frobisher, having said "Ah!" two or three times. He lay down. A sheet of something akin to cotton wool was placed over his face with apertures for nose and mouth.

"Breathe intirely through the mooth."

He breathed as he remembered doing during physical jerks. Funny how hard it suddenly was to breathe. Damn it, the air was absolutely impregnated with spirit. He couldn't stand this. He gulped. It was absurd. He was. . . . "Man is a sacred city. . . ." By God, not so sacred. It was horrible. He would certainly choke. He *was* choking. Blackness, now. My God, what a bloody rotten end. Choked in a . . . still blacker . . . reddish now . . . darker still . . . "Death opens unknown . . ."

He knew nothing of the tubes of oxygen and ether put down into his voice-box; of Wilson watching the clock dial recording the respirations; of Parker looking like an inquisitor, masked, rubber gloves, cutting . . . swabbing blood. . . .

Two hours later Frobisher stirred, blinked, and spoke. "Hello, nu-nurse. Feel all r-right." So he hadn't

choked. He could have sworn he would. Why didn't he feel horribly ill?

"Feel sick?" She took up an enamel bowl.

"No. Why be sick?" He smiled, his face stiff and puckered. "Did I—did I jabber much when I came round? No? How ve-very disappointing for you. Who—who's wired? O my God. Tell her—will you—I left an address there—yes—that's it—tell her 'All finished—feel lovely—going on O-O.K. Um. Lots love. O-O.K."

The Scottish sister sighed and tucked him up.

CHAPTER XXI

FROBISHER HAD a good time in the nursing home. He spent long hours in bed, dreaming, thinking, musing. He didn't read much, except Mottram's *Spanish Farm* and Masefield. He had taken *The Way of All Flesh*, *Moby Dick*, and Boswell's *Johnson* too, but beyond dipping into them, nothing. He told himself he was catching up with his thoughts. There was Sara the little Irish night nurse from Kilkenny to amuse him, too. When she bade him good-night she would remind him that if he couldn't get off to sleep the surgeon had said he might have a cachet; or that if he wanted lemonade he must call her. Well, he asked for lemonade he didn't want and cachets, too. Sara was as glad to talk for a while in the night watches as he was, and the second night after the operation he was awake a good deal: his wound tingled with a sensation of pins and needles as if his flesh were becoming alive after a long sleep. When he was able he walked abroad, with sedateness, round Regent's Park, his trilby hat perched ridiculously on his swathed head. He couldn't feel the hat was there and had to put up his hand from time to time to make sure. Wadham came once or twice and perambulated with him, recounting the malicious office gossip—how Ellis after returning from a murder at Nottingham was being visited by a voluptuous young woman from that city who asserted she was with

child, and how they kept sending down to the hall to see her when she called, not Ellis but Garton the courtly old man; how Bridgeman's life was becoming a nightmare through convicts from Dartmoor seeking when released, to sell him their stories, word having gone round the gaol that he was always good for ten pounds; and how Johnston, noted for Bolshie tendencies, being instructed to cover a story about a certain shooting estate with the understanding that the pheasants, wild duck and salmon trout that it was known would be bestowed on him, were to go to one of the higher-ups, had refused them, and now swore they were never offered; and how the higher-up was torn between a reluctance to admit he had been after cheap game and a desire to sack Johnston for his suspected defiance.

"Newspapers", said Frobisher, after one of their gloomy exchanges of views, "are fine things when you've nothing to do with 'em. Out of the office I look on them with admiration—day after day a chronicle of the world—bright, pretty accurate, decently clean, reasonably well-written, and most of it done at break-neck speed. They're just about the most efficient pieces of work that exist. But when on top of them or inside 'em, knowing the jealousies, intrigues, fakes, hypocrisies, pretences, belly-crawling, bullying, that goes on to produce the paper, the fear and strain men undergo—the whole business makes me sick. When I think of going back to 'the Street', I rebel. I should revolt as swiftly I daresay against any other profession, but. . . ." The idea was slowly taking shape in his head that, indeed, he never would go back. Just as he had left Burnham on an unconquerable impulse, so would he throw in his hand here. "I'm like a damned chemical," he said to Wadham. "Subject me to

certain influences and I react, change—it's inevitable."

Wadham said: "I've no right to say 'Get out' because I've never had the pluck to get out myself. I'm cluttered up with children, of course, though that's no real excuse. Men with guts don't allow responsibilities to stop them doing the right thing. However, I admit I haven't got enough guts. But you—without the slightest right I urge you to go away and write—write your heart out and if you don't have too much to eat while you do it, all the better. The best men never have had enough to eat in the beginning. Masefield was glad to get a review to do, and to take it in I'm told, and wait for the money—half a guinea, I think it was. You may have to come back and report the Old Bailey or chase the fire-engine, but, upon my soul, I shall be there to welcome you—a little thinner and greyer, a trifle more nervous, probably by then afraid of answering Forrester back in case I get fired." He knew Wadham meant it, and in that moment Frobisher was sick and hopeless. "Of course," Wadham went on, "you'd probably become an editor if you stayed on—but I don't know—you're not an executive man, you're a writer, and writers in the Street are kept at the writing job—no matter what other qualities they have, and, with rare exceptions, are so overworked recording impressions, pasting one picture on top of another in their minds, that they get prematurely worn out. And then you are turned on to ringing up actresses to ask whether they think men should wear moustaches. But, damn it, you know all about it. If you're ambitious you work your heart out at night trying to write plays or novels with what little strength and wit you've left at the day's end. And ten to one, they're rotten; like the ones I did early on. And you give over trying, and then, dear heart, you're finished for

good. Whereas if you'd put your morning flashes into your books instead of into the stuff the subs. don't understand and spike, you might have been a writer instead of —of, well, what the hell we happen to be; I'm blest if I know what. So, old lad, bunk, hop it, give yourself a charnst." He put his arm round Frobisher's shoulder and gave him a little hug and a quick glance sideways, terrified of becoming sentimental.

Frobisher suddenly felt, for a moment, with swift realization of how emotional the operation had left him, that he was going to cry. He said, with energy that startled himself: "All right, old fellow, I'll hop it." They walked on in silence. Presently Frobisher said: "They'll probably make you editor of *The Times* while I'm away. Give me a job on space, will you, when I crawl back with my rejected manuscripts in my pocket?" "I will," said Wadham, "if you will make me your publicity agent when we're all chasing you for interviews." They went on chaffing one another as they walked down Baker Street. Frobisher was thinking, in a rush of rather hysterical elation: "There isn't a soul now I can't tell to go to hell if I want. That's fine."

A fortnight later he had left the nursing home and the *Tribune* had released him. He didn't feel very comfortable about the way of it, for he told them he was weak and run down, thought it would be fairer to them if he recuperated at his own expense. He added he had some private writing he wanted to do, and altogether if he could be spared. . . . They were perfectly charming, a fact which hurt him. Beswick proposed organizing a presentation but Frobisher begged him not to; that would be the last straw, talking lies about how deeply he regretted going.

Now that he had decided to leave Fleet Street he suffered a revulsion of feeling, was no longer contemptuous. Every morning he saw there was a good deal of very fine work in the papers—humour, satire, straight recording of events, honest and witty criticism. Until lately he had always ranked himself with the "honest to God" newspaper men, those who went out after the hard news, and gave nerves and sweat in the task; he had reviled and cursed all those who had forsaken "the Street", clambered into the ranks of so-called literary men and then proceeded to sneer at journalism. Well, what was he doing but that? He was flung to and fro; one hour he couldn't have borne to return, the next he told himself he was an idiot for going away. But, though he felt his mind blown about as smoke in the wind (the phrase he had put into Grundy's mouth recurred to him often enough), he knew he was not, in fact, in any danger (though, again, was danger the word?) of returning. He felt unhappy as he went, at last, from man to man shaking hands. They were all friendly and seemed so genuinely sorry—"Look in, old chap"; "Don't forget us, will you?"; "Send us a box when your name's in electric lights"; "We'll all come and cheer from the gallery"; "Don't hesitate to walk in and use the library, if it's any use to you"—the last from Wardbrook the editor.

"I feel about ten shillings in the pound," he said to Wadham as they walked downstairs. "In my sane moments I know it's I who am wrong and that the job is nearly the best in the world."

"Tripe," said Wadham. "They'd all leave if they could; they envy you enormously." They went and had two bottles of Guinness each at the Cheshire Cheese, and Frobisher, growing mellower, looked about at the gallery

of Dr. Johnson portraits, and saw Fleet Street and literature take rank as brothers.

He began to feel boundlessly free, as if he might rise up from the earth like a balloon. He remembered he used to feel like that in France when he took off his accoutrements—pack, rifle, tin hat and the rest. This was almost the first time in his life that he had owed no master allegiance, been at no man's summons. It was magnificent. He longed to see "Train disaster, 35 dead!" screeching on a placard and know that nobody on earth had power to say, "Frobisher, there'll be a car round for you in five minutes." Damn it all, even on holidays he had always had a sneaking fear he would come across a murder or a terrible fire or some other calamity that would mean plunging into hard work. It was said that Wadham, seeing the Empire Palace Hotel blazing one midnight as he was going home, had rung up and said: "I gather there's a small fire or something near Piccadilly; better send somebody along, perhaps," and had blithely gone on his way. But Frobisher's conscience wouldn't let him do that. Nor would it allow him to be at ease as he thought of his approaching meeting with Fleur. He was acutely aware of it; waves of emotion ran through him when at intervals his imagination ran unchecked, and he trembled and looked pale and ill when he saw himself in the glass. With an effort he pulled himself together and thought of something else until, calm and with a sense of chill in his blood, he could turn his mind to her again. For nearly four months he hadn't seen her and his letters, he knew, had been too few, too strident, too occupied by a forced gaiety. Once long ago she had said, "I know you will feel parting more than I shall," and while he knew then it was true, he had resented it a little. Whether it was

still true he doubted; he had been conscious of a growing authority over her and the tyrant in him had found delight in it. Now that he was to see her, he was a little unsure of what their relations would be, he was weakened by his sense of imperfection; if she were distant he would have no just complaint—but that wouldn't prevent his being torn to pieces. Because he knew that if he were to make his life a proud and joyful thing it must be with her beside him; there was no abiding peace without her.

Now that he had said good-bye to the *Tribune* he felt something of a stranger in London. A host of plays to see, yet he wanted to see nothing; so much to do, and nothing he wanted to do. He had arrived at a crisis in his life and he had an ache to be in the middle of where he belonged. And he had no sort of doubt that he belonged to Lancashire, to Saddlebridge. He wanted to talk to Fleur, to Ben with his wise tolerance and to Susan with her eyes that looked straight through him. He wanted to be home for a space. He began to think that men are like those trees that thrive their best only in their native soil. Not all men maybe but then not all men had his passionate sense and love of the ground whence they spring. He smiled to himself, a wry smile at his failings, as he rode north in the train. He had cursed patriotism in France, called it a disease, sworn the decent future of the world lay in men travelling so much, inter-marrying so much, creating one common mixture of blood and breed, that the intense nationalism of our day would be destroyed, done with; and here he was ready to uphold the north against the world. Chinks, negroes, Yanks, Germans, Russians, French—his vision had seen them united. And now he saw scarcely beyond Burnham. He had striven

to be a pacifist, a no-more-war man, a Socialist, inclined towards vegetarianism—and, behold, the men he liked best were beef-eating, beer-drinking, damn-good Tories pledged to the faith that an Englishman is the best fellow in the world and a British ship and a British regiment fit to lick creation and probably meant by Providence to do it. About the only faith he was firm on was no more war, and he knew that wouldn't prevent him from putting a son into the navy. A fine kettle of fish he was, to be sure.

When he ran into the first greyness of the Potteries, with wet coal shining in the trucks—a drizzle was falling—he felt pleased and warm. Here was the old mixture of green fields and slag heaps, of odd pieces of railway line and derelict hen cotes. Here were the canals where men were wont to sit at five-yard intervals for a mile on end tempting gudgeon and roach with "gentles" redolent of aniseed and tackle finer than your trout fisherman's; here were the narrow reaches of dull, green water wherein he had plunged his thin body as a boy; here were old hay-stacks in the shadow of coal-pits, lonely, small cottages sheltering as near as they could to brick-kilns, and forlorn, whitewashed cattle-sidings stained with dirty rain. He began to hear porters saying: "I'll tell yo' summat else an' all." He had arrived.

At Bridfield his compartment suffered a shattering invasion from workmen—railwaymen, fitters and turners, cotton-factory tacklers—who carried rectangular baskets in which reposed empty brown or white basins that had held tasty and highly flavoured dishes such as cowheel pies or sausage and bacon, and maybe, in rarer instances, bread baked with milk instead of water; for your northern workman prides himself on putting his wages into his belly rather than on his back. A man with steel-blue eyes

and a broken nose bridge pushed back his cap, caressed a luxuriant moustache belonging to the 'eighties and went on with what he had been saying. "Nay," he said, "I'st watch cricket no more. Last time I were at Trafford they were o'er an hour gettin' thirty-five and a chap near me shouts out, 'Whar about it Lankyshire?' and I sez, 'Dunno' shout that road or tha'll wakken 'em up.' Aye, I've done wi' cricket ever sin'."

"Ever sin' tha made three ducks a-runnin' tha means, Tummy."

"Na, na, tha needn't split on me," said Tummy.

"Well, what art gooin' in for now? Tha carn't rust."

"I've joined t' band—second trumbone—we'n t' finest band i' Lankyshire for playin' up 'ill. We'n a grand piece we're larnin'—I've forty-one bars rest i' one place."

They flew past shining slate roofs and dirty brick walls and regiments of chimney pots and he rejoiced at the speed with which he was racing into what London would think desolation. He thought of the corner shops that rivalled bazaars of the East in the multiplicity of wares from cheese to crockery and boiled ham to bird lime, of the worthy aldermen who wore cigars in their waistcoat pockets and bought pictures for the Art Gallery because they contained figures of women they would have liked to take to Blackpool for a week-end; of the tram conductors who didn't think they were as good as you were but damn-well knew they were, and of the solid business men in cotton who took a bath once a week and unfastened the top button of their trousers at Masonic Lodge dinners. Did any place compare with Saddle-bridge? It did not.

The porters cried "S'albridge"—always a little self-conscious it seemed over the long word, as though three

syllables were pretentious, and he took a newly-painted brown taxi home.

" 'Ad a good 'oliday Mester Frobisher?" asked the driver hoisting a trunk, and adding without envy, "Yo' do get about."

"Prètty good." He didn't know the driver but the greeting gave him a comfortable feeling in the stomach.

Workpeople were streaming up and down Deanhouse Street as if a small football match were over. They lived packed tightly together, worked shoulder to shoulder, jostled in their tens of thousands at football matches, and went in hordes to Blackpool where they flowed over sands and concrete like a black tide. Solitude they knew little of; secrets were difficult to hold. Life here was a hard school that demanded a certain integrity and good humour to keep your fellows' respect. A thousand eyes watched and observed and a thousand tongues yarned and joked and pulled to pieces. The publicity of a London newspaper, he thought, is nothing to the eyes and ears and tongues of Saddlebridge. Up and down and up streamed the workers, rolling off pavements into the roadway and eddying back to pavement again, clinging, dark-clothed, dusky bundles, to tramcars, the girls laughing in harsh strident tones, mixing Lancashire with the newer American slang, wearing artificial silk stockings and shawls spattered with flakes of raw cotton, and the more brazen smoking cigarettes. For it was one thing to smoke a cigarette in the pictures and another to smoke one going home down Deanhouse Street.

It was a lovely April evening and the Circle was shabbier than usual in a light that showed the particles of refuse between cobbles and was reflected from the leaden tramlines. The river wound sluggishly round the bend,

filthy and disconsolate. No hint of spring there. Not for the past forty miles had it possessed a bounding spirit, a rippling note of music that is the possession of waters in their youth. Here it sucked and gurgled and had in parts as many iridescent colours as a peacock's tail. Here it was old and soiled and past redemption save in a cleansing death in the sea. Stout iron railings guarded it in a multitude of spears from those sojourners in Saddlebridge who might be tempted to find eternity in its bosom. If it *were* eternity they wished to find. Probably, he thought, it was no more than oblivion; probably like Madam Dupont-Delagneau they thought too little of this God-made world to have a high opinion of the next one since the Almighty indubitably built that one also. But spring is spring in Saddlebridge as elsewhere and his heart was bounding.

Ben was warming his light-grey coat-tails at the fire in the dining-room and they ate at once—hake with shrimp sauce, grilled chops, damson pie. They drank tea with all three, for those who work in Saddlebridge have no break for afternoon tea and must be revived and substantially fed at the same moment so soon as they get home. Susan was thinking: "I wonder if it's a wedding that's brought him home. Happen that would be good for him. Looking too thin by half and he won't let me mother him. It'll have to be a wife's job. Fleur. Yes, I think Fleur could do it. She's a bit of a beezum but there's a lot to her. She goes right for where she wants to be. If they pull the same way they might get anywhere; if they don't they'll stand stock-still, for she's as strong and awkward as he is, I'll bet. It'll be a big success or nowt." But she said nothing of that. What she said was: "You'll stop at home a bit, Martin?"

"I don't know. I'd like it but the doctor talked of getting into the sun."

"You're burning yourself out; you need quiet."

He thought: "Only Fleur can give me that."

"This writing business takes it out of you too much," said Ben. "Pity you can't work with your hands a bit. When I'm out o' sorts I go and throw some grey cloth about the warehouse."

"I shouldn't make cigarette-paper money at that," said Frobisher, suddenly recalling, though, the zest with which at times he had burnished his brass in the army.

"It isn't what you earn but what you spend," said Susan drily. She was wearing a maroon silk dress high in the throat with a diamond brooch on her bosom. He looked from her brooch to her hazel eyes and couldn't be sure which shone with the greater lustre. She had a stillness, a power of withdrawing into herself. A born matriarch, he thought. A pity she hadn't a house full of children or a firm to run. But perhaps through Ben she did her share of running West's mill.

Ben talked of the slump—Lancashire in the trough of the wave—people had begun to say there'd be tighter belts yet before the worst was ended.

"To look at London you wouldn't imagine anybody was hard-up," said Frobisher.

"That's what's wrong—too remote—like your generals who never saw the trenches and didn't always know what was going on in 'em."

"If you light your pipe with bank notes you can't buy boots and shoes with 'em later on," observed Susan.

Frobisher wondered if he were lighting *his* pipe with bank notes in leaving journalism. "Don't jump from your ship till there's another alongside," Saddlebridge said.

His ship coming up on the horizon was but a ghostly one, but he knew he didn't care. And his leap promised to last for months; for months he would be poised, quivering. Perhaps his landing would make a splash—"Aye," he thought grimly; "a splash if I miss the ship." But he was going on.

Ben inquired if he were going down to the theatre and Frobisher replied briefly that he was; but he would wait until the performance was over. He didn't want to sit in the audience and talk to people. He thought of the *Gazette* office and Grundy and pushed that aside also. He hated explaining his business. His enemies doubtless would say: "Frobisher was a dud in London." At the moment he didn't care a damn what they said. Ben was wondering: "Shall I offer to run him down in the car? No. He probably doesn't want me. I wish I saw further into him. I suppose it would be the same if he were my son. He'd still be a stranger."

They rose when the meal was over—Saddlebridge ate and had done with it, as they said—and went into the dining-room overlooking the long, narrow garden that never got enough sun. Clouds were coming up across the sky like black-sailed ships. Ben began tentatively tuning his violin and sat running his finger quietly over the strings and turning the fiddle over and over in his hands. He had fine strong hands with hairy backs and square-ended fingers. It was a lovely fiddle, a Strad. model rather large and built of thick wood, resonant and full in tone. The scroll was richly carved—the head of an eagle —and the sound holes were voluptuous in their curve. Ben dusted the resin from the belly with a blue and purple silk handkerchief and pursed his lips. Susan caught Frobisher's eye and smiled and Frobisher said: "I'd love

you to play something, Ben." He knew and Susan knew that Ben wouldn't play till he was asked. Ben tucked the silk handkerchief into his collar and began to play an old minuet that took Frobisher to Knutsford on May Day with cross-gartered Morris dancers weaving a dance up the street. Ben stood lightly swaying on his feet, his grey eyes staring dreamily at the hearth-rug; the notes leapt and quivered, jumping about the ceiling, returning to the fiddle's depths, running up the walls and scampering across the strings. He knew Frobisher was fond of the tune and Frobisher for his part was made proud by Ben playing it. He caught Susan's hazel eyes turned softly on him. O but you had to come to Lancashire!

Dear Brutus was over when he got to the theatre. The house had been good—nobody drew like Barrie—and Martha and Fleur were rapturous. "I'm surprised at you," he said, "swallowing this sentimental stuff like a pair of farmer's wives." "Hush, love," said Martha, "he makes me feel pure. When I'm in *Quality Street* I feel a proper lady. Shy us that cream, Fleur."

Fleur said: "We take as much on Monday, Martin, as with the first four nights of your stuff." She was emerging from her paint; the towel had rubbed colour into her cheeks, and her eyes were flames that leapt when she looked at him. He had been strained and had trembled a little with passion and longing as he walked up the street but now it was as though blood had rushed back and filled him with a singing tide.

"Has London thrown you out on your ear, Martin?" asked Martha banteringly.

"The hole I had didn't quite fit me," he said. "I'm hexagonal or something. Besides, Martha, you know how much I hate work. Well, in the job I had, everything that

happened meant work. Damn it, we even recorded the plays you do here. I'd got scared. If I had gone to San Francisco I believe they'd have had another earthquake. I want to be able to laugh when the steamer sinks and not care a damn if the hotel catches fire because it will be some other guy's job to find out all about it. I don't care if the Government falls or the Prime Minister's murdered or the King drops dead at my feet. I'm through." As he finished rain drummed on the roof. "Sounds as if I've come home," he said ironically.

As they waited at the stage-door for a taxi, the slanting rain where for a few feet the light caught it, shone in a myriad silver cords, endless gossamer chains racing on invisible pulleys. The water struck the pavement with a vicious hiss and rebounded. The two-yards dash they made for the car door left them splashed, and with his handkerchief he wiped Fleur's hands and dress and kissed her fingers before drying his own. She wore a green satin jacket and skirt to the knee, with a lace blouse and a fur necklet. She took off her *cloche* hat and shook her curls out.

"Hullo, darling," he said. His voice was low and gruff, his heart contracted with love for her.

"Hullo, my dear," she said. That was all. He took her in his arms and as he kissed her she shut her eyes and opened her lips a little. They sat thus while the car lurched and the rain swished on the windows. When he released her a strange warmth and security occupied his bones.

Fleur stared through the window down which water raced in rivulets. "Like riding in an aquarium," she said and gave a low laugh.

"Certainly plenty of queer fish to be seen." He pursued his effort at brightness no further.

"How soon could you leave the Little?"

"Why—have you a part for me?" No emotion in her voice. This love-making took less out of her, it seemed.

He resisted the temptation to say he had the biggest part for her woman can play, and said: "I was wondering, that's all."

"Don't be inscrutable, Martin."

"Well, how soon could you?"

"As Wilfred tells me at least once a week he's going to sack me and I've no contract, I should say I could walk out—so long as I don't let them down." They left it at that. He imagined she knew what was in his mind. The rain had stopped when they left the car in Linthorpe and the moon was shining with a mocking serenity near a dark blue cloud whose near edge was flecked with gold and silver. He left her at the gate because he was sick for the day of How-do-you-do's and small explanatory statements and also because he wanted to think as he walked back to Saddlebridge. But the night was so lovely that he walked home half bemused and never thought at all.

It was a fine, clear day with a vibrant wind when they climbed the narrow, twisting stone and earth path to Linthorpe Moor the following afternoon. The sky save for thin, grey slashes of cloud, was bare, a wash of light blue. On the first small height they stood among the whins and looked back towards Saddlebridge. Smoke from chimneys was flying in short, firm, dark pennants as if from ships' funnels, till the wind blew it to nothing. For a space that smoke knew where it was going; as he did—also for a short space. She asked: "What are you laughing at?"

"I'm not."

"Fibber. Your mouth is dimpled at the corners."

"Well, you know Grundy called me 'Smoke in the wind' don't you?"

"No. You're always imagining I know things you've never told me." She spoke a little ironically.

"I thought you could read my mind."

"Why *did* he call you 'Smoke in the wind'?" He saw she resented it—her sense of proprietorship breaking through, he thought—and he said, eyeing with amusement her serious face ready to be angry: "Because I never know five minutes on end where I'm going."

"Why do you delight in ridiculing yourself?"

"Does me good. Exhibits my masculine tolerance and humour. Besides, you know how conceited I am. . . ."

"You're being perverse."

"Yes, darling. We always tease those we adore."

She didn't answer. A reddish curl was moving restlessly in the wind on her cheek, her lips were slightly parted as she faced the breeze and her eyes were narrowed so that the lashes were long, almost as though she slept. Her bosom still rose and fell perceptibly, for the climb had been stiff. He stood with his arm linked in hers, the warmth of her body reaching his own. She turned her head and looked at him and pressed his arm slightly.

"Dearest," he said, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

She murmured something about his habit of damnable reiteration but he saw it was only to cloak her feelings.

She turned. "Let's go higher," she said.

They walked on in silence, except for brief words of caution as they trod on loose stones or pressed between two clutching whins. A few sheep scampered away in a scuffle of stones, stopped to look back at them doubtfully and jumped spasmodically another three or four yards.

A miner, washed and out for a walk, stood shrilly whistling his dog, two fingers in his mouth. The whippet was loping across the moor, nose down, his yellow jacket a glancing spot of colour. The miner turned to them as they passed. "Tak's no notice," he said jovially. "One word fro' me an' her does as her likes. Her's as bad as her mother." But whether he meant his wife or the dog's mother Frobisher didn't know.

The wind was dying and the sun warming the moor. Far across the heather in the crystalline light two peewits were writing low figures in the sky.

"What's the next job going to be, Martin?"

He thought: "So her realist's mind is puzzling over the pennies." He said: "A play, I think."

"I mean your real job."

"Writing's my real job."

"Yes, darling, I know. But you can't live on writing plays."

"That's got to be proved. Besides, I shall do short stories, the highest-paid form——"

"You know you are useless at plots."

"On the contrary I have three marvellous plots. First —a man is made a baronet because he bungled so badly his estimate of making a bridge across the Nile. He calculated it would take three years. That was because his arithmetic was so bad. The correct figure should have been two years. He actually did it in two years and a half, half a year longer than he should. But as everybody thought he had saved six months, they made him a baronet. Don't you think there's a delicious irony about that?"

"Sounds like a feeble imitation of the French."

"Women have no satirical sense. The second plot con-

cerns a man who thought he had discovered a wonderful means of extracting electricity from the air—worked a lathe and lit his house with it. He was on the point of selling the idea for a fortune when the corporation took up the tramlines outside his house and he found he had merely been extracting electric current from the overhead wires. I think that's a lovely story."

She said: "Um!"

He sighed. "The third strikes a human note. There were two friends at college together, one handsome, athletic, amiable, popular but possessing no remarkable amount of brain-power—let us call him Johnson. The other, Pengelly, a Cornishman, was small, ugly, almost hump-backed, but abominably clever. He was a student of mind control, of the Yoga and Vedic doctrines of India, a delver also into what we call the occult but what will one day, he said, be found within scientific knowledge. At all events by intense study and experiment Pengelly became able to control Johnson's mind and since he was devoted to Johnson and used his power to assist him in examinations and so forth, the two got on admirably. To what precise extent Johnson was aware he was being assisted is in some doubt, but there they were—virtually master and pupil and certainly Johnson used to turn his mind towards Pengelly when in difficulties and was duly stimulated. In this wise Johnson passed his examinations with flying colours—as of course did Pengelly—and they both graduated in medicine with honours. Since apparently both were equally gifted and Johnson held all the natural advantages of looks, and temperament, he made rapid strides and soon became a fashionable London surgeon. Pengelly made medical research his line of study and by the time he was thirty

was a Fellow of the Royal Society. For some years nothing marred their association, nothing caused them to regret their strange relationship one with the other—for, remember, Pengelly still exercised his control and when Johnson had an operation of especial difficulty to perform it was Pengelly's custom to isolate himself and give what help he could. So they continued until they met Lady Juliet Gordon-Aske. At that time she was said to be the loveliest woman in London, a promising painter whose advice was sought by the designers of ballets and whose choice of dress and style of house decoration were noted and copied widely. It was natural enough that she should be drawn to these two young earnest and very able men and that on their part they should fall in love with her, Johnson with every hope of success, Pengelly realizing from the first that his passion must be hopeless. Indeed he could laugh at himself for a time, and relish the bitter irony of the situation—having created for the woman he worshipped the man she was destined to marry. Or so he thought. Matters progressed in this way until it became clear that Lady Juliet was not altogether indifferent to this diabolically able little man on whom the medical world was heaping honours, that, in fact, she found his brilliant conversation and his penetration into the minds of men a source of admiration. Pengelly began to hope. It was now that Fate began to turn her wheel. Lady Juliet fell ill, suddenly and rather mysteriously. It was natural that both men should offer their advice, their devotion and skill. As she made no progress Johnson suspected cancer and finally broached the question of operating. Pengelly was deeply puzzled but was in favour of waiting, suspected some affection of the kidneys and wanted to try a new serum he

had invented. On this the friends differed, quarrelled, broke. Lady Juliet, who was a brave woman and knew the folly of delay, chose the operation. Naturally again, Johnson, by this time the foremost young surgeon in London, was asked to perform the task. He was eager and yet afraid, afraid for the woman he loved, distressed at the rupture with Pengelly, full of vague foreboding. The morning of the operation found him nervous, over-anxious. Pengelly had taken himself off to his country house, possessed by vexation and worry and a determination to let Johnson pursue his course as best he might. At all events it was in that spirit he left London but it is known that the following morning he rang up the nursing home to inquire the time of operation, presumably with the intention of assisting Johnson by a flow of mental energy. But he was too late; the work was done, and, unhappily, disastrously done. Johnson had proved right in his diagnosis—Lady Juliet had cancer; he had removed the cancer but in so doing operated so clumsily and fumbled so badly that she never stood straight again. Johnson, torn with anguish, wanted to marry her. She, now fragile, bent, refused, saying: 'The woman you loved no longer exists.' Pengelly too, hastened to place his life, his knowledge, his wealth at her feet but she made it clear to him it was Johnson she had loved and loved still. She lived for two years. Johnson, no longer assisted by Pengelly and shaken by his failure in Lady Juliet's case, went rapidly down hill and is now a sixpenny doctor in the East End. Pengelly outlived Lady Juliet six months, during which time he was appointed second physician to the King. Then he committed suicide.

"Well, darling, what about that?"

They were dawdling slowly across the moor. His face

was lit with the joy of letting his mind run free, and he felt for a moment like a god.

"I think you're wonderful," she said, arching her brows.

"So do I," he said fervently, and laughed. But he half meant it and for the moment he didn't care a damn what anybody else in the whole world thought. "You wait," he said, and made a flourish with his walking-stick.

They walked on without speaking for some time. When he looked at her he saw her face had become clouded and he suffered a swift wave of apprehension. She was disgusted with his conceit, he thought—he hadn't carried the gaiety off.

"What is it?" he asked.

Through his mind rushed a remembrance of his long silences in London, his taking everything so much for granted. Her mouth was compressed and drooping at the corners. But, in the midst of his uneasiness he couldn't help reflecting: "No man could change so sharply as this —like the weather."

"Sometimes," she said in a low, level voice, "I've nearly hated you. I don't know you, Martin." She spoke as if she had lost him and was without hope of finding him.

"Don't know me?" So he was right in what he had feared.

She shook her head. "No. I used to think I did, but now . . . no. You wished to be near me, and you ran away. You went to London to make a career and you've forsaken it. I feel you are unaccountable. Your operation . . . need you have had it? I never slept that night. I suppose you did?"

"Yes."

She half-smiled at his honesty.

He pondered, very glum. Then he said: "I'm not really unreliable. I'm reckoned very dependable at my job, always have been, and got some beastly work sometimes because of it. I'm too conscientious." He was oblivious of being boastful. He was seriously attempting to appraise himself. He went on: "I love you terribly. I've loved you far longer than you have me. I went south because I had to, if I were to get a good job. And then, well, the job wasn't what I thought. It seemed to be 'destroying me' as the Irish say. It was probably my fault, but I was miscast. I gave up the part. I must find something else, some corner that fits my angular soul and body. As for my operation, don't you notice the bold look in my eye now that I know people aren't staring at my disfigurement?"

She turned and looked at him, pointing her eyebrows. "You're just the same," she said, "and if you are different, I'm sorry." He kissed her hand, but she shook her head as though she were saying: "Don't imagine we've made it up." She went on: "Isn't it true that whatever gets in your way, you'll push it aside, priding yourself on being ruthless?"

He pondered again. "No. I rather wish it were. If I were as you believe I am, I might achieve something first-rate. But I'm not. I'm soft-hearted, and able to see the other fellow's side, and obsessed by stupid rules like 'my word is my bond'—tripe like that. So I shall never be a Napoleon or Northcliffe or a Leverhulme or Lloyd George. I find it too difficult to be angry with fools, or stern with people who've done their best and failed because they haven't enough brains. Kids come up and beg, and dogs wag their tails at me, and head waiters know they can safely ignore me while they attend some bull-necked

fellow with a monocle, and railway porters are friendly on the slightest provocation. I start to tell people off and before I'm half through the anger has gone and I'm merely entertaining them—like Potash or was it Perlmutter? I often wish I were fat and pompous and overbearing. I'm too easy to get on with, that's the trouble, too good-natured, too——"

He stopped because she was laughing.

"Thank God for that," he said. "I've made the wench laugh again."

"It's a queer looking-glass you've been using," she said. "You're easy-going so long as you get all your own way, you allow your sense of justice to outweigh your loyalty so that if I committed murder you'd be willing to see me hanged——"

"No, not you; anybody but you, my dear."

"You can be cold and sardonic and sarcastic, to you most people are idiots, you don't know what you're after and when you get it, it's not what you want."

"Well," he said blandly, "have you ever known me to be wrong about anything? Haven't I fallen in love with the most adorable woman in the world? Haven't I?" He put his arms round her and kissed her.

"Oh, my darling," she said, as if he were a son she loved deeply and despaired of.

They sat with their backs to a boulder. Clouds had widened and now stained the moors with their shadows. He tucked her arm through his and stretched his legs and grunted happily. She said: "I used to be the merry one and you were gloomy; and now——"

"That", he said, "is because you've fallen more deeply in love. It's a terrible business, love. You wait. You don't know you're born."

"You frighten me," she said. "I hadn't the least intention of being friendly."

"That's fine."

"But what's going to become of us?"

"Well, I've thought it all out. We'd better get married."

"Martin, you're impossible. You talk about getting married as if it were having a cup of tea."

"No, darling, as if it were choosing somebody to spend a holiday with. That's what it is."

"Without a job and without money—much money."

"I've got a lot of money—six hundred pounds."

"Suppose I find I don't love you enough?"

"I love you enough for both of us. I'm only alive all through when you're with me. You are the only living person with whom I am utterly content wherever we are and whatever we are doing. I've tried others and none of them work."

"And how long will six hundred pounds last?"

"For ever, maybe. I'll form a theatrical company and tour 'The Two Brothers'. I'll play Ralph Fairfax and you can have your old part—if you're good and do what you're told. While we're touring I'll write a most marvellous play that will run in the West End for a year."

"But you can't act."

"I shall improve."

"Martin, darling, this is completely mad."

"Listen, beloved." He took both her hands and pulled her round so that they almost faced one another. "It is the world that is mad; we are about to become supremely sane. We can't do without one another, can we?"

She looked across the moor, turning her head, but in the curve of her cheek he saw how happy she was. He shook her hands. "Come on," he said, "say it."

"No," she repeated, "we can't do without one another."

"And we're both too old-fashioned and we should make too many people unhappy if we lived together unmarried?"

She nodded.

"What the world calls safety is slavery—mental death—going down on the same train to the same monotonous job, putting away your insurance money, bound fast to a machine that will throw you out so soon as it slows down, let alone stops, working like hell till you are old and decay and die. By God, I'd rather be combing a beach, or keeping a handful of pigs in Ireland, or travelling Scotland as a tinker; I'd rather sleep under a hedge in Sussex and sell a poem once a month, or be a seaside pierrot at Brighton—anything, so long as I keep mastery over my life and do nothing I hate and despise, nothing that tarnishes my blasted immortal soul or robs my eyes of the right to stare every man straight in the eye or my lips of the right to tell him to go to hell. I'm a rebel and I won't be disciplined."

"Now we're getting the truth, Martin," she said. "I thought we should. You can't keep it back. If you betrayed me and I questioned you, you'd admit it."

"I could no more betray you than I could kill myself," he said fiercely.

After a pause he went on: "We have a few months' heaven anyway before us and a sporting chance of success. We should be cowards to turn our backs on it. Sometimes I think the war taught us how to live and we've forgotten. We got more pure delight out of six days' leave with, maybe, only mutilation or death round the corner, than we now find in a month's summer holiday; we went 'over the top' with less fear than men have of public opinion or losing their job. The world is full of fear—fear of the law, of the boss, of the

truth. We're overridden and clamped down, we've built cages for ourselves. Let's go our own way, beloved. We've got energy and youth and some talent, anyway. The world is a bully. Fear it, cringe to it, and it will hurt you, and, maybe, crush you. Show it you don't care a damn, and it will lick your boots. And by heaven, it's going to lick ours."

She said: "Do you remember that line, 'There ain't no danger if you ain't afeard'?" He drew her into his arms.

"I knew you would come, my dearest," he said.

"Yes," she said. "I am ready."

They were married a month later. The weeks had gone swiftly. He had re-written parts of "The Two Brothers", registered himself as a theatrical manager, and spoken of the project to Martha and Charley Fry who were both willing to take a chance and tour with him for their repertory salaries. Charley said: "I'm a damn fool, Martin, but I've known that for quite a while." He spoke of it as "The Venture". Martha said: "I can't let you go, love, without me to look after you. Besides, we might do well and finish on Shaftesbury Avenue, making a fortune, and I've got that hard-fisted since I cum up North, lad, it would break my heart if I wasn't in at it." Managers had pencilled in dates at Liverpool, Blackburn and Sheffield and there seemed no doubt a tour could be planned. Ben offered to come in to the tune of a couple of hundred but Frobisher shook his head. "I've got enough to find out whether I'm mad or not," he said. "If people like us, I shan't need it; if they don't, mine's enough to lose." Besides, he was eager to take all the risk. Tom Armitage said he wouldn't dream of spending a penny on anything he wrote himself; it wasn't the author's job. What were

managers and publishers for? That, Frobisher knew, was the general attitude. Well, he would have a shot at proving them wrong. And, in his own case, the facts were different. He was going to be business manager and act a bit—try to build a new career.

Grundy took him out to drink beer and jokingly asked for the job of publicity manager; Wadham wrote that he saw his dreams coming true and that he was saving up for a box when they got to Town. Frobisher had his moments of horrid doubt, and alternated between misgiving and wild elation. Fleur was resolved and practical and full of faith in him; or, if she wasn't, she put up an astonishingly good show at it.

They were married at Burnham Registry Office. Susan and Mary were both hurt at that but Frobisher said, rather brutally, that he couldn't stand ritual or the wedding service with its talk about procreation of children as if that were all marriage were for; and it would be like lying to make professions in a church whose faiths were not entirely his. He was unhappy on the wedding day until he and Fleur had left them all and had driven away. It ought to have been enough, he felt, to climb a hill and stand hand in hand and tell the sky and the wind that henceforth they were married and belonged to one another. He ate nothing, made staccato remarks when spoken to, and replied in a sentence to the toast of their healths which Tom Armitage proposed in cool, chiselled phrases. Somehow, Frobisher felt he was fighting everybody that day, Susan over the church, Mary in taking her daughter, Ben and Tom Armitage in launching into what, he knew, they thought a daredevil theatrical enterprise. Only Martha beamed on them with a full heart. Or so he thought. They travelled all afternoon and

evening down to St. Ives. They talked little. They were never alone and what they had to say wasn't for others' ears. But it suited him well enough. To read *King Lear* and look up now and then into the face of the woman you loved—life didn't hold much more than that.

It was bedtime when they arrived. Their hotel room was large and looked over a tennis court and garden, both wrapt in sleep. Beyond the garden the sea shimmered, deep pearl flicked with gold ridges in the light and dark, blackish-grey in the shadows. The night was still and the wash on shingle low and swishing. There was a dog's bark and a clock's chime of the half hour.

He stood at the window looking out, while she unpacked her case. There was a knock at the door. . . . Would they like a pot of tea, or whisky, or. . . . No. Nothing.

"I'm pretty tired, darling, I think I shall go straight to bed," she said. Her voice trembled a little.

"Whatever you like, beloved," he said.

When he took her in his arms, his heart was beating unendurably fast, so that she lifted her hand and put it on his forehead.

"You're hot, dear," she said. "I think you're ill."

He moved his head to and fro on the pillow, shaking it. "No, dearest," he said. "It's only—I've been on fire so long; I'm nearly burnt out, I think." She put her arm round his neck and drew his head down to her breast. He kissed her bosom and lay there, still. He stretched out his legs and touched her toes. "We're just the same length," he said.

Every beat of her heart, every sigh, every movement in laughter, was communicated to him.

He was thinking: "So she will lie in my arms through

the years; after my little glories and my downcastings; before our children come and after. This will be my comfort, this will renew me; this God has bestowed on me. O hell, and I shall never be worth it."

His eyes burnt bright in the dark.

END OF NORTH WIND

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